

THE IMAGE AND THE SEARCH

Books by Walter Baxter



LOOK DOWN IN MERCY

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by

WALTER BAXTER



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TO
R. K. B.

"... in every kind of human occupation there is always some regard for the beauty of the world seen in more or less distorted or soiled images. As a consequence there is not any department of human life which is purely natural. The supernatural is secretly present throughout. Under a thousand different forms, grace and mortal sin are everywhere.

"Between God and these incomplete, unconscious, often criminal searchings for beauty, the only link is the beauty of the world. . . ."

Waiting On God.

SIMONE WEIL.

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BOOK ONE

(I)

SARAH sat up in bed and held Edmee's hand tightly. She was not very afraid of the pain, but the stitches were close to the right eye and she was nervous in case she flinched and the eye was hurt. She counted eleven tweaks, five in the eyebrow itself, the remainder in a line across the temple to her hair.

After the doctor and Edmee left the room Sarah picked up the hand mirror. She was no longer worried that the scar would disfigure her, for on that score all the staff of the Paris clinic had reassured her. This had not been difficult to do, for ever since childhood she had been subjected to a rain of comment concerning her beauty, and had come to regard it in the same light as her father's wealth. It was a fortunate accident which time had slowly touched with certainty. Of course she had understood that some calamity could remove both, and just such an event had almost taken place, bringing with it a strange insecurity. Now, unknowingly, her intent gaze in the mirror was for reassurance that she herself was still Sarah Valmont.

As the days passed and the last tiny scabs flaked away, Sarah slowly became less preoccupied with her appearance. She returned to Edmee's flat, but her former unreflecting vitality did not come back as quickly as the older woman had expected. She, but not Mr. Valmont, had already heard from Sarah the events leading to the accident, and now began to wonder whether Sarah was

suffering from a sense of guilt. One evening before dinner, as they drank their customary sherry, Edmee decided to speak.

"You're not blaming yourself, because that man was killed? It would be stupid enough to make me very angry."

Sarah was puzzled for a moment. "Blame? Oh no. I explained all that. George drove too fast because he was angry and a tyre burst."

"Then why do you seem so depressed?"

"Am I? I'm sorry, darling, I don't mean to be." She paused and then began to speak, although she hardly knew in advance what she was going to say. "Perhaps it's just that I feel somehow much older. And more than that. As though everything that went before has been sort of crossed off and I have to start from scratch again."

"Sarah! Don't be so childish. You're not twenty-three yet, you've got practically nothing to cross off. You didn't even like this man; all that's happened is you've got a rather distinguished scar."

"Yes, I know. But, you see, George had been so curious about all my past and had really gone to work digging it out. I suppose I told him too much, but you know how it is; someone isn't particularly interesting and you find yourself telling them far more than someone who is. It's laziness with me. I can't be bothered to find out about them and if they seem very interested it's easier to talk about yourself. Anyway, it was really the first time I've ever bothered to review everything in one lump, and I think that depressed me. Time passing, and not getting married, and falling in and out of love twice, so violently. It makes me wonder if I'll ever fall in love and stay in love."

Edmee managed to hide her smile of relief. "Yes, of

course you will. But you should be careful. You are too attractive and too rich, your father is too easy-going and you suffer from being an English romantic. But none of that is so bad as this thing of yours, to be moved by a face and not a person. I have been bad for you too, I should have put my foot down about that German boy, but I genuinely thought there was no danger. In any case I know I can't control you over these things, you would only hate me if I tried. No one can control anyone in this way. Besides, compared with many girls in your position you are positively good. You just see a certain type of beauty and you *must* have it; being beautiful yourself, it's too easy. What you ought to do is marry the first kind hunchback that comes along."

"That's more or less what George said, without the hunch part."

"He probably said the right thing with the wrong motive. I suppose he also said that if it wasn't a success you could divorce him?"

"Yes, of course."

"Marriage for people like you is useless if you have an escape clause."

"If Michel hadn't died would you still be married to him?"

"Probably not. I'm one of those fools who know the truth about many things but find the practice too hard. So I ease my conscience by telling you what to do. It is still the truth. But you must stop being depressed, that will get you nowhere. One day," she added with deliberate malice, "your English knight will ride by and sweep you into his saddle."

"Don't, Edmec! You make me feel quite sick."

Then they laughed.

That night, before Sarah fell asleep, she thought again of Taormina and the long evenings of dinner and wine and confidences with George. She had killed him, in a way, through not loving him, but that was not her fault. She remembered the interminable and futile arguments as he tried from desperation to demand her love, and, though she had been both exasperated and acutely embarrassed, she had sympathised with his persistence. His own bewilderment that she could not love him had been exactly mirrored by her bewilderment that he could expect her to.

She was glad that she had not tried to explain her refusal on reasoned grounds. Even now those reasons seemed childishly inadequate. She wished that she was capable of falling in love with men much older than herself, or with men whom she did not consider physically attractive. Most women could do both. And yet she was not sorry. What experience had come her way had already touched her with a mysterious delight, which for all its vagueness seemed far more real than the cold practicality with which people like George (at the age of thirty-five) discussed love.

From behind the slowly melting bars of her youth she looked on the world of older people with pity. She *knew*, from her own experience with Francis during her second year at Oxford (she did not complete this second year) and from the few agonising weeks she had spent with Helmuth in Munich, that for her there was an ecstasy to be found in physical love so great that it could only diminish. Edmee and George and all the others might, in their different ways and with their different motives, argue that this was not so, that age and experience brought other pleasures even greater. But though for the sake of not being thought young she sometimes

agreed with them, she never wholeheartedly believed.

In any case she had in the past been too absorbed by her own sensory existence to spare time for a considered judgment. She was not interested in other people's minds unless she was in love, and did not expect them to be interested in hers. Until now her life had been shut off into two compartments—there was her everyday life, her summer holidays in Italy or the South of France, the winter months in Switzerland or Austria, her father's house at Sevenoaks, the visits to Edmee in Paris; all this overlaid with a host of acquaintances, an unending treadmill of pleasurable activity. And there was her private world (so much smaller and yet so much greater) in which she dreamt, awake or sleeping, of the necessity of love.

But she did not know this. Nor, in point of fact, did she dream at all that night.

(II)

A month passed, and at ten o'clock one morning Sarah was sitting in her dressing-gown on the edge of Edmee's ornate bed. Almost every morning she would do this, opening their mail or picking through the newspapers for items that might amuse them both. Edmee sat propped with pillows, on her lap a battered leather box that erupted hairpins and nets, old lipsticks and soiled powder-puffs, surrounded by a paper-chase of used tissues. She excused the unsavoury mess by saying that the best salads were mixed in soiled bowls.

There was little of interest in their mail, bills for Edmee and receipts for Sarah. There was the usual smattering of invitations to this party or that exhibition, invitations which would not be accepted. For the past month they

had lived quietly and pleasantly together, accepting a minimum of invitations. Usually they would lunch alone, and then if it was fine they would drive a long way out of Paris. Edmee's maid would have left by the time they returned, and they would plan some bizarre meal to cook themselves, or go unaccompanied to a theatre or cinema. And by now Sarah had thrown off the physical effects of the accident; all that was left was the scar. •

Perhaps of the two of them it was Edmee who was the more quiet. Beneath her customary brisk cheerfulness there was a mood half happy and half sad, for she was certain that the next time Sarah fell in love she would marry.

"There's nothing in the paper unless you want to hear about Hitler: oh! here's a bit about a drunken cowboy. He bet someone he would bite a rattlesnake. So they went out and found one, and he did bite it. When he got up he was so drunk he fell on the snake and it bit him and he died." Edmee made no comment, which meant that she did not find it amusing. Sarah put down the paper. "What time ought we to meet Daddy at Le Bourget this afternoon?"

"We must be there by a quarter to four. If we are late again Mr. Valmont will think I'm responsible for your bad manners."

It was misty when they drove to Le Bourget. The December sun flowed slowly through the bare trees and the vaporous air took away its warmth and left only pale colour. As they arrived Sarah glanced at her watch and saw that already they were five minutes late. Immediately that nervous tension which hangs over every terminus broke on her. As soon as they were out of the car she hurried through the corridors towards the lounge while

Edmee's high heels clicked protestingly a long way behind. She pushed open the glass doors, but apart from one man sitting at the bar the room was empty. Without thinking, noticing only that he was dressed in some sort of uniform and therefore might be an official, she crossed the room and stood next to him.

"Excuse me, please, but has the four o'clock plane arrived from London?" Behind her she could hear Edmee slowly crossing the parquet floor, and the man lowered his newspaper and turned to her. He was young. They looked at each other while he stood up slowly, mechanically folding the paper, and then they smiled as though they had known each other for a long time.

"Not yet, I'm afraid." He answered in English. "There's fog at London and the last I heard was that it would be an hour late, if it comes at all."

Edmee had reached them and Sarah repeated what she had been told while the man watched her face. Edmee accepted the news philosophically, glancing round the room. "So. We had better sit down."

Sarah again looked at the man, and their smile was confidential, like a brother and sister who have planned to impose their will upon a governess.

"Perhaps you would care to have some tea, or a drink, while you wait?" He addressed his remark to Edmee's half-turned back. She knew at once that he was speaking to her, and she thought that in his voice was a strange note of deference. She turned quickly and looked at him somewhat arrogantly, puzzled but not displeased. Then she liked him, and her face softened.

"Tea! No thank you! But perhaps a small drink. Sarah?"

"Yes . . . It's rather early but I don't see why not." She waited anxiously, knowing that if he did not introduce

himself at once his first good impression on Edmee would be lost.

"May I introduce myself? I'm Robert Middleton."

"I'm Sarah Valmont," she put in quickly. "This is la Comtesse de Fecathe."

They smiled at one another formally. He pulled out two more stools from the bar and they sat down. There was a pause, and initiative seemed to leave Robert and Sarah and flow into Edmee. She had pulled back the middle stool so that they sat in a half circle, and now called briskly for service, ordering Dubonnet for herself and Sarah, suggesting that Robert should drink beer. Then she turned to him and began to ask what he did, where he lived, why was he in Paris? And Sarah listened, immensely grateful that what appeared to be an intolerable burden of conversation had been taken from her. Her eyes never left his face and she listened with concentration to everything he said. But to speak to him, now, in the presence of a third person, that would be impossible.

Robert did not object to being questioned. He told Edmee that he was an only child, that his parents were still alive and lived in Wimbledon. His father was an estate agent. He had been to school at Swanton, and added that it was a bad school. But Edmee thought that nearly all young men said that their schools were bad; it was a public school and that was good enough for her. He had left at an earlier age than most boys in order to train as an apprentice with Imperial Airways. In his own eyes he was now a fully-qualified pilot, but there was a further long period as a wireless operator and then navigator before he captained an aircraft. He liked his work very much. He was not afraid, he assured Edmee, of the plane catching fire, suddenly falling out of the sky, or, as she had put it, breaking off at the wings. Now he

was waiting for a friend to finish some minor repair to the plane, and they were scheduled to return tomorrow.

All the time he spoke to Edmee he was aware that Sarah watched him. Perhaps she always watched people so intently. He had forgotten the sound of her voice, and longed for her to remind him. He wanted to ask her how the scar had come; it was so new. For him the scar set the seal on her beauty, without it he could hardly have thought of her as human; he would have been inhibited and probably unresponsive. And which side was the scar? The right, surely. He was compelled to glance at her again. And they smiled as the gassy French beer seemed to swell in his stomach, and he forgot everything except the gleam of her teeth, the gold of her hair, while the walls and the ceiling and the floor and Edmee's voice dwindled away. They were alone.

"Where's your friend gone?" He stood up quickly.

"To wash," Sarah said with surprise. He turned to the bar, confused.

"Will you have another Dubonnet? How did you get that scar?"

"Are you having another drink?"

"Yes."

"All right. I had a car accident in Sicily."

"Were you badly hurt?"

"Oh no. It was nothing." She remembered that George had been killed. "For me," she added hastily. She *knew* that she would see him again, that he would have to know. "The man I was with was killed."

"How ghastly for you!"

"Yes. No . . . Don't let's talk about it." She forced herself to smile. The drinks were in front of them and before he could put his hand in his pocket Sarah had placed the money on the bar.

"No! Please!" He was shocked. She tried to stop him pushing the money towards her, and unthinkingly covered the back of his hand with her palm. For both of them it seemed as though the momentary contact stretched on indefinitely.

At seven o'clock that evening she had bathed and was resting on her bed. Her body felt heavy and relaxed as though she was about to go to sleep, and now and again she yawned deeply. She had thought about Robert so much in the last few hours that she was confused: she could remember him feature by feature but she could no longer remember his face. He was tall and well built. His nose was straight, with a tendency to turn up, broad rather than thin at the base. His hair was very dark but not black; it was wavy, thick, touched with the lustre of that curiously beautiful sheen which would be gone in a few years' time. He could not be more than twenty-three or -four, perhaps not even that. His eyes were strange, a vivid yet calm blue, and against this colour his eyelashes showed as long as hers, and thicker. His mouth was broad, the shape of his strong lips was repeated in a lighter shade of skin before the darker shadows where he shaved. Perhaps it was these well-defined shadows which overlaid for her his youthfulness, leaving an impression of maturity and strength and masculinity.

Edmee came into the room and put a shallow glass of champagne on the bedside table. She sat at the foot of the bed.

"Is this for me?" Sarah asked, smiling. It was an unusual gesture on Edmee's part.

"Yes, *chérie*. I've had mine. I think I shall need it

tonight if I'm to be landed with the friend; Michael what's-his-name——."

"Huyelk. He seemed all right, Edmee. I should think he's a 'gentleman', wouldn't you?"

Edmee shrugged. "Who isn't nowadays? I should have said not."

"Well, Robert is, I can assure you."

"You ought to know, my dear. You can't expect me to be able to sort out your incredible shades of who's a gentleman and who's not in England. I think there is something much more important about Robert than whether he is a gentleman. He's not only charming, he might even be good. But *good*."

"Do you really think so? Why do you think that?" She sat up, full of eager curiosity as though Edmee was a fortune-teller.

"Don't be so stupid, Sarah, how can I answer that? I just feel it. Tell me, did he really suggest joining us for tonight, or did you put him up to it while I was in the lavatory?"

"Well, I think we both sort of suggested it as soon as that man told us there would be no planes from London. I only wish Michael hadn't been included, but I suppose it couldn't be helped. If I was him I'd much rather go off by myself. But I knew he wouldn't. Those sort of Englishmen never do in Paris, at that age. They're nervous."

Edmee stood up and walked towards the door. "Perhaps that's also why Robert didn't try very hard to put him off," she said, and closed the door before Sarah could unravel her words. In her own bedroom she poured out champagne from the half-empty bottle and sat heavily in front of her dressing table. She looked carefully at the tired face watching her from the mirror, at

the disillusioned eyes and the mouth that was hard but not unkind. She was quite certain that this time she would lose Sarah; not her confidences nor her friendship nor love, but something which, added together, was more than all that.

She was surprised that she had given assistance spontaneously; happy that she had done so.

In a cheap hotel in Jean Jaures Robert had also bathed and was lying on a bed. It was still too early to dress and the double bed took up so much space in the small room that it was difficult for him and Michael to move about at the same time. He wished Michael had not taken a double room. Under any circumstances he would have preferred to be alone, but on this particular evening his desire for privacy amounted to a craving. (Even as a child he had had this tendency and his father, who understood him very well, had set aside one room in their semi-detached house. There he would play with his trains and Meccano: later the room would be littered with the exposed complexities of wireless sets. All that was past, but the room still retained something of the flavour of those days. Instead of toys were a few technical books and a long row of dog-eared Penguins. There were old travel books too, battered curiosities, and it was to these that he often took his moments of contentment, pulling one out at random, turning the pages idly until a strange word caught his attention. Then he would read. And though by reading he forgot his happiness the taste of it would stay bottled in him, sealed down by some exotic bird, some fascinating useless irrelevancy, or an unheard-of island in an unknown sea.)

Unlike Sarah, he could picture *her* image as clearly as though she stood at the foot of the bed, the perfect oval

of her face, the perfection of skin and colouring, the full mouth and grey-green eyes. He tried to analyse why it was that she should have affected him so vastly. She was beautiful, but so were many others who had failed to do more than evoke a sensation of visual pleasure. Again and again his mind would return to her scarred temple, with a persistency that worried him. He could not decide whether he would have felt the same if she had been unmarked, and he smiled as he thought that to fall in love with a scar was not very sensible.

He knew beyond doubt that he was in love, although he had never been in love before. The state of his mind and body told each other this. There was a deep happiness, a flowing current of vitality that made him conscious of a pulse in his throat, the saliva in his mouth; his beating heart seemed to occupy more space. And beneath all this, a vibration that was nearly pain. But there was no desire; to see her, to talk to her, even to know that she lived, was enough.

Although at the age of twenty-three Robert had never slept with a woman this was not due to innocence or prudery. Many factors were responsible. A natural offshoot of his desire for privacy was a desire for freedom. Strengthening this was a precocious kindness which had not been squandered on a whimsical love of pets or a too intense affection for his mother, and through conservation this kindness had matured into a profound if inarticulate sensitivity for all people. Partly because of his necessity for privacy and freedom he had refrained from women: the intimacy, the possible ties involved, jarred his nerves. (The idea of going with a prostitute never occurred to him.) His sensitivity for others reinforced all this, and so when moments of desire came, as come they certainly had, the very thought that someone

might fall in love with him and he be unable to return their love was painful, not to be risked until he was capable of repayment.

When that time came he would decide whether to sleep with them or not before marriage; the point, he thought, was an academic one because when he loved he would of course marry. Nor was it vanity that prevented him from considering the possibility of falling in love and not having love returned. He knew intuitively that unless it was returned he would be unable to love, for he could not inflict on another person the outrage of an uncontrolled or unrequited love. And he knew now, with a certainty that was no less certain because the only evidence lay in a glance and a touch of hands, that Sarah was ready to return his love.

This power to identify himself with others (which at his age was remarkable enough) helped him to view the world as a simple whole made up of a complexity that was incomprehensible. For him Blake's caterpillar on the leaf really did repeat his mother's grief, although why it should be so he had not the haziest notion. The attitude was not unusual; many people take refuge from thought by expressing a similar point of view. But it was remarkable in Robert's case because it produced a genuine humility. He sensed that what he thought and did, and what happened to him, were important only in so far as he was a human being, but he himself as an individual was both ordinary and unimportant.

This was his strength and this he subtly exuded to other people. But he was as incapable of knowing this as a man is incapable of knowing the smell of his own breath or of judging the true sound of his own voice. He lived his character, he did not speculate about it. Still less was he capable of speculating now, when for the first time his

own capacity to give had encountered an equal capacity to receive. These were strangely vast compared with the tiny but essential catalyst of the shape of his face and Sarah's scar.

"I hope this isn't an expensive restaurant we're going to, Bob. I'm a bit ribby. They don't look a cheap couple to me." Michael had finished putting away his own clothes and now began to arrange Robert's on a chair.

"You'll only have to pay for yourself, I'll settle up with you tomorrow morning. If you feel like that I can easily make an excuse for you. You can have a sandwich somewhere and go off to a flick."

"What, in Paris! Have a heart! Actually I had rather advanced plans for you and me tonight. Perhaps if we get away not too late . . .? But of course you won't want any part of that I suppose, now you've fixed yourself up with a smasher. Trust you to sort one out like that!"

Robert smiled at Michael's implication that he was perpetually chasing women. The men with whom he worked, the men at the rugger club where he occasionally played, the middle-aged men who were friends of his father, all of them gave each other the honorary rank of a Casanova, and Robert merely regarded it as a boring male convention, popular because the smell of spice (for many of them) was better than no spice at all. But though he smiled he decided to stop Michael's tongue, afraid that some remark might be passed about Sarah which would genuinely make him angry.

"Your idea of advanced plans is to go to some lousy night club, have a couple of drinks and eye the girls and pee yourself with fright if one of them comes to the table. Look, I'm all set for tonight. If you want to do anything

else say so now, but don't come along if you're only going to bellyache afterwards."

"I'm only joking," Michael answered mildly. He almost added that it was easy for Robert, with an attractive girl to look after instead of a middle-aged bag. But in his heart he knew that Robert would pay more attention to Edmee than to Sarah, just because she was middle-aged. He told himself that he had better make the best of it. After all, she was a countess. He knew that snobbery was a despicable thing and often said so, but nevertheless he had every intention of telling as many people as soon as he could. Apart from the straightforward satisfaction that the very word countess would give him, Michael knew that most of his pleasure would come from the subtlety with which he could introduce the word.

(III)

Robert sat in the plane and watched the grey belt of sea wrinkle beneath him. The black metal band of the earphones pressed down his thick hair. Lazily he turned his happiness over and over in his mind, but its scent was confusing and already long stretches of the previous evening were half forgotten. Only some incidents stood out, like trees and steeples showing above valley mist.

He had talked for a long time with Edmee, for whom he had felt an increasing affection. He had asked her questions about Paris, about her almost vanished estate near the Mediterranean, touching the foothills of the Pyrenees. And something he had said about the trapping of migrant birds in the mountains in autumn had released in her a flood of almost forgotten things, the stone jars of dismembered salted geese, sealed with their own fat, the

threaded chanterelles and mushrooms looped among the drying harvest of herbs hanging from the kitchen rafters. The unforgettable smell of sighing pine trees in hot sun. And he had been happy to talk of these things, hungry for them, and all the time he knew that Sarah was next to him, that in a short time they would be alone together on the small square of dance floor. Then he would ask her a hundred questions. But when the time came the questions had become unimportant.

It was while they were dancing together for the fourth or fifth time that Edmee had left the table with an unsmiling Michael following. She had pushed her way through to them, telling Sarah to join them later at another bar.

They sat down without referring to the question of how soon they should leave. They talked more easily now, asking personal questions. And one remark of Sarah's still disturbed him, though less and less as the intensity with which it had been said died from his mind. Half in jest, half seriously, he had asked her:

"What does it feel like to be so incredibly beautiful? Is it troublesome?"

"I don't think about it very much. But why should you bother to ask, don't you know? You're far more beautiful than I am. Why, you're the . . ." And she had stopped and coloured faintly, whilst he, who had never before had such a remark addressed to him seriously, blushed deeply. Then they talked of other things. As though imbued with independent life, their hands had met beneath the table, and from their hands a heavy drowsiness had spread; so heavy, of such peace, that in the middle of a sentence Sarah had yawned in Robert's face.

They hesitated on the pavement and she had suggested

walking. But it was sharply cold and he was afraid for her, insisting on taking a taxi. Now both were sick with anxiety as to when and where they would meet again, each believing that the other would forget, would make a mistake; would, in the meantime, disappear. While they walked slowly up the stairs to Edmee's apartment they finally managed to agree to meet again at Le Bourget, in the lounge, in three days' time at four o'clock.

And at that moment, outside the door of the apartment, exhausted with a fatigue and pain that was neither one nor the other, Robert had been grateful that they were about to part. They kissed each other shakily on the mouth, without passion. The door had closed behind her and he was walking away from the house. It was only then that he wanted to turn back, to knock on her door and see her again. But that had been nonsensical, for he knew that he could have said nothing, done nothing, only stood in the doorway and looked at her through a transparent and impassable barrier.

As Edmee watched their meetings she wanted to warn Sarah of many things. But she knew that her warnings would be useless and that in the end success or failure depended only on Robert. It was with relief that she kissed Sarah good-bye a few days before Christmas, for if Sarah could not talk about Robert she would not talk at all. And by the end of those three weeks Edmee was ready to die with boredom.

(IV)

As soon as Michael heard from Robert that he was pending Christmas at Sevenoaks he guessed that it

would only be a matter of weeks before the engagement was announced. The idea that Sarah might refuse never entered his head. In his experience girls seldom refused marriage if the man was at all eligible. Even if he had realised the vast material difference between them he would still have considered her acceptance certain.

He decided at once that there was now no question of stopping Robert, and that the best way to keep his friendship was to make a friend of Sarah. No opportunity for direct action presented itself, but in the meantime he often told Robert what a beautiful and charming girl he thought she was. He hoped that his praise would filter through to Sarah.

Michael's attachment to Robert was compounded of many things, hardly any of which he either understood or would have wished to understand. For the roots were firmly planted in his own squalid childhood, and Michael had no intention of ever letting those roots be uncovered.

He was the same age as Robert; born in Newcastle, where his father owned a moderately successful grocer's shop. But the profits had not run to an expensive education of four sons, of whom Michael was the youngest, and one after the other they had gone to the same grammar school, leaving at the age of sixteen. The two elder boys worked in the shop, the third joined the merchant navy. But Michael, with no love in his heart for anyone, spurred by a loathing for Newcastle and contempt for his father's business, with a flair for mechanics and a vague idea that flying was romantic, had eventually fought his way into Imperial Airways.

He had started his school-days very badly by relying on the protection of his elder brother, who had been devoted to him. By his physical strength he had been able to express that devotion in the only way he knew—

punching the heads of the boys against whom Michael had exaggeratedly complained. Unable to visualise the time ahead when he would have to rely on his own fists Michael took full advantage of his position. And when eventually some tear-stained boy reminded him that in two terms his brother would have left, it was too late for the *volte-face* he tried to effect. With the limited, but in some matters uncanny, acumen of schoolboys they immediately understood his motive and the physical fear behind it. By the time his brother left they were ready to close in and mete out merciless punishment. He tried everything he knew, from open bribery to subtle diplomacy, but although in the course of time numbers of his tormentors left and he himself grew stronger and more immune, for four years he was never left completely alone. Nor did the contempt in which he was held ever diminish. It was carried from the school into the homes of many of his brothers' friends, and was the chief reason for his detestation of Newcastle.

The experience had been so unpleasant and so protracted that he determined above everything else that it should never happen again.

When he left Newcastle for London and the apprentices' hostel where he was to live there was an unformed resolve in his mind that over the next few years he would break with his family entirely. But overriding everything else was his compulsion that from now on he would be popular.

He had observed that one way of achieving the foundations of popularity was to become the friend of someone already popular. In London, mixing with the other apprentices and carefully building up a façade of pleasantness, he had quickly seen that Robert, although quiet and retiring, enjoyed the nebulous quality of being universally

liked. He set out to be as agreeable to him as he could, curbing the natural malice of his tongue, his meanness, and an immature cynicism regarding the motives behind anyone's good action. And he tried so hard that his efforts did bring about an improvement in his character.

Although he did not know it, he was attracted by a stability in Robert's character and by his physical appearance. He sensed that there was no necessity to search behind the spoken word for the hidden thought. If Robert said that he could not go to a film because he wanted to work at home he meant just that, and not that he found Michael's company distasteful. And when they did go to a cinema and had bought their cheap seats it would not occur to Robert, as it always did to Michael, to see if there was an opportunity of slipping into a more expensive row. He found that he enjoyed the security of sitting in a shilling seat if he had paid a shilling. But by himself he could not resist the opportunity of getting something for nothing, a feeling that he had made the price of a plate of sausage and mash. But he never did it unless the chances of being caught were negligible.

As for being physically attracted by Robert, of that he had no conscious knowledge. At the age when they first met he hardly knew anything about such matters. There were no boarders at his school and therefore boys were not periodically expelled for being found in the wrong bed. And although, of course, pederasty did occur, those concerned found it simple to go for a bicycle ride into the country, or to look at each other's stamp collection in the privacy of their bedroom. His unpopularity at school tended to isolate him from both the theory and the fact. But he had learnt that most people became very angry when the subject was mentioned, and he shaped his views accordingly.

Had Robert in turn been drawn towards Michael, then this latent tendency might have developed. Even if Robert had lived in the hostel Michael might have come to realise that there was a hidden depth to his regard. But Robert was not at all drawn to Michael or any other man physically; there had been a few attempts made on him at school which were all unsuccessful, and for no more complicated reason than because that type of sexuality did not happen to attract him. There was no shock, no hidden trauma; merely disinterest, and it was the disinterest which prevented him from being seriously pestered. Adolescents, contrary to the opinion of outraged parents, are not usually seduced by other adolescents. They consent.

As Robert's appearance became almost as familiar to Michael as his own he almost lost the feeling of inner warmth which sitting next to him on a bus, or in a cinema, had first produced. And for what remained he quickly invented an explanation. If the thought, now, of sleeping in the same bed as Robert was vaguely pleasurable, whereas the same thought concerning others was not, there was no need to look further than the fact that Robert was his best friend.

As time passed Michael changed, superficially, a great deal. He lost his never very pronounced North-Country accent. His father's shop became a store ("sort of Sainsbury's, only very miniature of course," he would say if asked directly his father's occupation). He joined Robert's rugger club after he had been in London a year, and learnt the jargon and the outlook of the middle class so rapidly and thoroughly that not only did those members who had had doubts forget them, Michael almost forgot as well. His half-yearly visits to Newcastle, which his father insisted he continue until he was twenty, were

unpleasant reminders that his brothers could never pass for gentlemen in Wimbledon.

During this time he evolved an attitude which could be summed up by the word 'expedient'. It was expedient to be well liked and buy people drinks. A drink would be bought in return and being liked was a primary essential for opportunity, which he learnt to look on as synonymous with money. It was expedient to conform with the accepted standards of the majority. What they thought, said, and did could not be wrong, or if it was it did not matter because it was still the majority. His private sins were only wrong if they became known, and they never did.

To begin with, limited objectives filled his mind. But as they were achieved one by one, his vista, though remaining narrow, lengthened. He left the hostel and took a room in Wimbledon. He had angled ceaselessly to be taken as a paying guest in Robert's home, but Robert had refused all baits. This move he found expensive but essential, for living in a hostel, even calling it a chummary, had become embarrassing. Always mean, money began to play a larger and larger part in his thoughts. He saw rich cars arrive at the airport; he looked from the gallery on to the stalls and experienced a new form of envy. But he believed firmly that one day opportunity would come and then he would do whatever was expedient.

The question of women also arose. But this was merely reflected conventionalism, nor was there any conflict between his personal desires and his habit of modelling himself on Robert. Robert enjoyed the company of women and took them out when he could afford to, but somehow avoided becoming involved. Michael did the same, but less frequently. How Robert avoided entanglements he did not know, his own method was to make it

painfully clear at the earliest moment that financially he would be unable to marry until he was thirty. He had once been picked up by a prostitute, soon after his twenty-first birthday. Fuddled with beer, more from an indecent curiosity than desire, he had gone with her. He decided that the experience, though quite pleasant, was certainly not worth two pounds.

He reverted to his usual formula of sublimation. A game of rugger on Saturday afternoon, scabrous talk during the ensuing Saturday night party, followed by masturbation in which he fantasied whatever woman he happened to be going out with at that time. And although, of course, it was wrong, he consoled himself with the thought that if you really got down to brass tacks everyone else did exactly the same thing.

Meanwhile his life stretched endlessly away in front of him. Yet always in his mind, encysted by time but ready to break out, remained the memory of having been an object of scorn and dislike. But as long as he was careful and above all as long as he remained Robert's friend, he was secure from that.

(V)

Since their first evening together Sarah's obsession with Robert had slowly blotted out every other thought. She was infatuated to a degree that made her feel physically ill. With nothing to do all day she found time an intolerable burden, and yet was too lethargic and obsessed to be able to make any effort at passing time more quickly. For her there was no joyous quickening. On the contrary everything became as stale and flavourless as the food she played with at each meal. Theatres, parties, shopping, all the minutiae of her daily life not only bored

her but were actively resented as interfering with her daydreams. Only in Robert's presence (and increasingly only in Robert's arms) did she find any relief from the deadly monotony with which she was enchanted. But even that relief was insufficient, for the laws of time had ceased to operate. She would meet him at Le Bourget and in a flash their meeting was a parting.

Long before Christmas Robert was worried by her behaviour. Each time his schedule allowed them to meet he tried to find out what character lay beneath the surface, and each time he was baffled. To some extent he learnt the setting of her early life, that her mother had died before Sarah could remember her; where she had gone to school; that her father was an importer of shellac from the Far East as well as owning lac plantations and a factory in Southern Bihar. But she told him all this as though it was about another person. Even when he would ask what she had done during the two or three days of his absence he could tell that she was struggling to remember some incident from a grey inertia. She seemed to be drained of any wishes or opinions other than his. And during their more intimate moments of privacy she behaved in a curiously somnambulistic way, exuding an air of lasciviousness of which he was certain she was unaware. She would lie in his arms and her breath would come slowly and deeply, her cheeks would faintly flush as though with sleep. If he spoke she answered with her eyes closed, sleepily; even the most simple question seemed to require a tremendous effort of concentration.

It frightened him because he understood, could feel the same sickness and knew by its very violence that it must pass. He was afraid that when it passed from Sarah there would be nothing left.

He had been given five days' leave at Christmas, and

hoped that in her own home, surrounded by her own friends, she would show signs of emerging from this peyotl world. But it was worse than Paris, where he could at least insist on Edmee not being completely ignored. Here he could do nothing to prevent Mr. Valmont spending long hours every afternoon reading in his study, nor going to bed each night at ten, leaving them alone in the firelit lounge.

And though he did protest to Sarah at Mr. Valmont's seclusion he knew that his protests were made with little strength. He knew that he was eager to respond to Sarah, that he ached to sleep with her, yearned for the suffocating evenings spent alone, kissing until the kisses were rancid with saliva and breath, while record after record dropped with a scaly clatter on the radiogram and the solitary question "Do you love me?" would be shuttled back and forth in its infinity of forms. He was too much in love to resist completely, and the struggle to do so left him exhausted and almost wishing that these five days were finished.

Robert had not formally proposed to Sarah, in fact neither could remember very clearly who had been the first to mention marriage. To both of them, for different reasons, it had seemed inevitable and their first admission of love for one another served also as proposal and acceptance. It had then been decided that Robert should speak to Mr. Valmont during Christmas. As the days passed he began to ask Sarah whether the time had come, and he regarded her evasiveness as just another example of her inertia. It increasingly irritated him.

But on this score he had underestimated her. It was not lethargy that made her put off the interview but fear that when Robert discovered the extent of her own and

her father's wealth he would develop scruples. She knew that her father would not raise any objections to her marrying a poor man, but she also knew that he would tell Robert frankly what her financial position was, and that nothing she could say would make him change his mind that this was the proper thing to do. She had no idea how Robert would take the information, and so she had planned to allow the size of the house and garden, the servants, the two cars and the chauffeur, to inform him gently.

On the fourth night of his visit, after Mr. Valmont had said good night and Sarah had turned out the lights in the lounge and was lying against him on the sofa, he spoke.

"Listen, darling. When am I going to ask your father? He'll be asking *me* soon!"

"Oh, I don't know. Why not after dinner tomorrow? I'll leave you alone with the port." She was nervous suddenly and got up from the sofa to pour two glasses of liqueur brandy. She put them on a low table by the sofa and then kissed his mouth. "Don't let Daddy frighten you, Robert, about being able to keep me in the style to which I'm accustomed stuff."

"Why should he? I'm earning eight pounds a week, and my father said he'd let me have another four until I earn twelve myself. We can easily manage on that."

"Yes, of course. But the curse is Daddy's really rather rich. As it is, I get the income from seventy-five thousand pounds, although he makes me save a third of that, and when I'm twenty-five, or marry first, I get the capital. And just recently he's been talking of doubling that to save death duties."

He was silent for a moment. She was watching his face and he lowered his eyes. The size of the capital figures

had made him uneasy and confused, but he did not want her to suspect this.

"It seems I've done pretty well for myself, but really it's got nothing to do with *us*. I'd marry you even if I had to keep your father. You never imagined I had any money, like yours I mean?"

"No, I didn't, darling. I was sure you hadn't. I never bothered to think whether your people had either, it didn't matter. Daddy won't make any fuss, I know, but I just thought I ought to warn you."

She was extraordinarily relieved that Robert had taken the news so calmly. It was as though the last possible obstacle to their immediate marriage (and all that that implied) had disappeared. She picked up her glass of brandy and handed Robert his. She drank and then quickly turned, half lying on him, kissing him with her wet mouth. The suddenness took Robert by surprise; the smell of brandy, the feel of her moving mouth, firelight, the soft weight of her body—he found himself twisting from beneath her, pressing against her with the muscles of his loins, his blood a hard thick column inside his throat and head and stomach. She clung to him, kissing his mouth passionately, longing for him to take her now, on the sofa, fully dressed. She twisted her mouth and body against him. Suddenly Robert understood exactly what she wanted, what she would let him do, and all desire went; he got up, drained his brandy and then walked to the sideboard for another. When he sat again on the sofa it was at some distance from her. There was a long silence and she moved her position a little nearer, propping herself with cushions. She felt cold and afraid.

"Darling, what's the matter? What *does* it matter? We love each other."

"Do we?" He was silent again, feeling the brandy he

had drunk, waiting, knowing that in a moment it would enable him to speak. "I don't think you love me, Sarah. You're just infatuated. Perhaps you'll never love me."

"Robert!" She was shocked and each word grated her nerves with pain. "That's not true, I love you more than anything else in the world, and you know it."

"Do you, Sarah? Perhaps. Perhaps I'm just being stupid and very young. But I think I know how you feel about me, and in a way I'm very proud and grateful. I love you, and if you told me to get out of this house this minute I shall always go on loving you, in a fashion. But I don't intend sleeping with you till we are married, and I don't intend marrying until you want me irrespective of the bed."

"Why are you being so foul? Have I done anything wrong before? Good God! I'm only human. You seem to think . . ."

"Think what?" He turned his head sharply.

"Nothing."

"That you've never slept with someone else, isn't that what you were going to say? Are you crazy? You didn't have to ask Edmee whether you ought to tell me. I know damn well you have. And I care a little, but that's mostly pride and a lousy possessiveness. But you, you are too generous and too selfish, too conventional and yet too much an individual to be a virgin. And to cap it all you're too lazy. You think virtue is a sort of languor; it's too much like hard work for you!" But Sarah hardly heard this, almost before he had finished she broke in:

"Edmee never said anything to you, did she?"

"Are you trying to be stupid?" His fingers were shaking with fear that this might be the end, that she would not forgive what he had to say. He longed to reach out and stroke her hair, to stop his mouth with her lips. Instead

he got up and poured more brandy. "No, Edmee never said anything about you that wasn't so grossly over-loyal as to verge on down-right lying. But I'm not like you, so obsessed by my own feelings that I have to go running to all and sundry to find out what my character's like."

"I've not done that except to Edmee. And naturally I asked Daddy what he thought. I'm not interested in your character. I love you and I don't care whether it's good or bad."

"Exactly! And don't you realise what a hell of a mess you're going to land yourself in when you fall out of love with me and find I'm an ignorant drunken wife-beater? For all you know I might be anything. For God's sake stop being a whimsical bloody fool and imagining that this . . . good thing . . . we have now is here for ever. Because it's not. And by the time it goes you had better learn to have loved me because I'm another human being, and therefore probably need love. I'd prefer that you understood me a little, but, failing that, just love me because I'm human."

"You're getting tight, Robert. I was naughty, I'm sorry. There's no need for a big scene."

"Yes there is, I've been wanting to say this to you for weeks." He spoke more quietly. "It's good to get drunk sometimes. You think I'm po-faced, don't you? Deep down you feel I'm just a bit of Wimbledon, but because you're so limited and can't imagine not having me, you're prepared to put up with Wimbledon for a few years and then have another think . . . whether to get rid of me or not. You won't. When you marry me you marry for ever, and if you don't like it you can lump it. You think you shocked me by what you did earlier. You didn't. I'm unshockable." Anger and drink and emotion were

beginning to slur his words together. "You're the sort of person who must have proof of everything: I'll prove my point I'm not shockable by saying I don't care if you've been laid by every coalheaver in Kent."

She raised her hand and leant forward to strike him, pain and hatred beating inside her fingertips. He did not move, his mouth was smiling and his eyes held hers. She found that it was impossible to hit his face, and as she dropped her hand he took her in his arms.

They lay together on the sofa, and for a little while they stroked each other's hair and kissed each other lightly. But soon the atmosphere of peace that flowed between them closed their eyes, and they slept for a long time.

(VI)

He had indeed jolted her awake, and for the first time since they had met she was capable of seeing him as an individual instead of some dreamlike figure miraculously existing just for her. This sudden change was due more to necessity than conviction. She did not understand why her past condition was wrong, it seemed to her quite natural and therefore right. But she did understand that Robert objected to it with an intensity that had frightened her, and therefore she forced herself to change. She was surprised to find that time flowed less boringly when Robert was away, and that her pleasure in his company became more intense. And though she still longed for the time when they would be married, the suffocating hours of fantasy were gone.

The change in her outlook was immediately apparent to Robert, but he was afraid that the effect of his words might not last. He put himself in her position, alone

most of the day at Sevenoaks with nothing to do except fill in time, and he knew how often (in spite of his work) his own thoughts turned to her during the course of the day. He knew that to give way, to sit and dream, somehow expended what he wished to hoard. To expect Sarah not to do that was, under the circumstances, impossible. He decided to fill the vacuum of her days with the complications of their marriage. One week-end a fortnight later, while they were coming back to tea through a thin January drizzle, he suggested that they should be married in April.

"Robert! That's wonderful." She smiled at him, a little mockingly, and he laughed.

"I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. I wasn't bluffing. I think we ought to get married because I don't like you living here having nothing to do all day. Besides that, I'm a bit scared about all this war talk. . . ."

"Oh, that's all nonsense, darling, of course there won't be a war."

"Probably not. I don't know. But it might happen and then Heaven alone knows where we'll be. I should automatically be called up. I'd prefer the risk of marrying too soon than having to marry once there's a war. If it comes this year or next we shall at least have had some time together, got a home going. What do you think?"

"I think it's wonderful. Let's get married on St. George's Day, the weather always seems to be good, somehow."

But when that excellent reason was put forward Mr. Valmont did not see any special virtue in the twenty-third. He suggested the fourth, which would enable them to claim income-tax rebate on the previous financial year, and both of them were happy to agree.

From now on Sarah had little time to dream. Her immediate reaction to the spate of congratulations was to engage a temporary secretary, but this Robert forbade. Nor would he allow his own mother to assist Sarah in finding a house in London, not only because he wished her fully occupied but also he knew his mother to be an interfering and often malicious woman. This did not change his affection for her, nor did his affection change his determination to keep the two women as far apart as possible.

To begin with, Sarah complained that it would be impossible to complete all the arrangements in so short a time, but she quickly found considerable pleasure in overcoming the difficulties that arose. She showed an unexpected efficiency. And Robert was careful to praise her, to enlarge on the difficulties, to show an interest in all the details of curtaining, furniture and linen which in truth bored him. Soon it seemed to Sarah that there had never existed a time when Robert had not been there to endorse her decisions or advise and help. Another unforeseen result of this activity was to begin the process of severing Robert and Sarah from their former friends, a process which the war would complete. Robert was still working on the London-Paris schedule, and whatever time he could get away from this and from his parents he spent at Sevenoaks. For him Sarah's friends were strangers, and now the time he spent with her already seemed too short. He was quite happy to stay in the house, and if they did go out it would be to an occasional cinema, or for a long drive to some small inn where they could sip their beer anonymously. And as February slanted towards March Sarah was so busy, continually driving to London to supervise the decorating of a house she had found in Chelsea and the buying of

her trousseau, that even if she had wanted to go out and see her friends she would have been too tired. Their impulse was to stay together and Sarah's excuses for refusing hospitality were ready-made. After they were married, Robert said, they would begin again to be sociable.

Even Michael found their reserve impossible to penetrate. He had naïvely expected that as Robert's best man he would see them often. But until shortly before the wedding he had not seen Sarah at all in London, and had only been invited to Sevenoaks for one Sunday. Prior to this visit he had an uneasy feeling that Sarah did not like him, and in this he was correct. She had been surprised when Robert told her that he would be best man.

"Why him particularly, Robert?"

"Well, we've known each other a long time. I seem to like a lot of people, but I don't go in much for bosom chums. To tell you the truth he more or less asked me. Don't you like him?"

"I don't think I do. He's sort of coldly wet."

"He's all right. He's one of those people who cling, but I've got him well taped."

"I wish he wouldn't call you Bob, it makes you sound like a sheep-dog somehow. Still, that's better than Bobby. Hadn't you better ask him down to lunch next Sunday? Then we can put him back into cold storage."

And so Michael had come down and had whistled silently to himself. For the first time in his life he saw the house of a rich man with a naturally good taste for luxurious comfort. He could not understand how he had ever disliked Sarah. He decided that she was very attractive and quite unaffected. Her father was a charming old boy too. God! How lucky Bob was, and

the fool sat there pushing Surrey chicken into his face and didn't even know he was alive. Still, he was a good chap all the same. He wondered what sort of an allowance the old boy would kick across to Sarah . . . he looked remarkably healthy, good for another twenty years at least. The thought gave him obscure pleasure.

He set himself out to be as pleasant as possible. Before he caught a late afternoon train he managed to speak to Sarah alone for a few minutes, during which he praised Robert extravagantly. He also suggested that although Robert disliked any outward show of affection the roots of their friendship were deep and of long standing. It always delighted Sarah to hear Robert praised and she warmed to Michael.

But when he was gone they both forgot him again, Sarah completely, Robert only remembering when they met at Croydon. Michael often suggested that they should all meet in London, or if that was difficult he could come to Sevenoaks on a Saturday night. But Robert always had some excuse, and when he became too persistent told him bluntly that they were too busy.

Michael consoled himself with the thought that once they were in London it would not be so easy to shake him off. And their present state of insanity would not last long after the honeymoon, not once old Bob got on the job. And that reminded him, he ought to start calling him Robert.

One afternoon in the middle of February Sarah sat down to make out her list of guests. Robert had arranged to meet Mr. Valmont in the City and drive down with him, bringing his own list. She began to look through her father's address book and then her own. She was

surprised to find that out of several hundred people who could claim to be considered she cared hardly at all who accepted and who did not, apart from a small group of families whom she had known all her life.

But even these she felt no urge to seek out. They were a part of her landscape, like the rather untidy roof of the gardener's shed she could see through the bare branches of an overgrown apple tree. They had attended each other's children's parties, forming sudden attachments and equally sudden and inexplicable antipathies, forgetting one another when they were at school, meeting again in the holidays.

As she sat and nibbled the end of her pen she realised the slow drift away from each other and from those unreal days that had taken place, as each in turn had been caught up in the current of the adult world. In her case the process had gone even further, spending, as she had, so much time abroad. Now if she met them in the town (Sheila or Harry, Isabel or Jane) they would meet with warmth and gossip for a while. One would say that the other must come in for a drink soon . . . they would phone and arrange it. Sometimes the phone would ring, more often not.

Suddenly this train of thought depressed Sarah. It seemed utterly wrong and unnatural that she should only care deeply for Robert and her father and Edmee. She was touched with a sense of loneliness, of smallness and futility. She wondered if it was her fault, if it was she who gave out nothing. But as she thought of her closer friends she could not honestly convict herself of being worse than they. Jane would ask for news of Sheila although they were almost next door, and laughingly explain her ignorance on the grounds that the closer people lived the less they saw each other.

She supposed that for men it was different. Their friendships were easier to keep alive, their activities better organised. She remembered one of her father's friends saying pompously that the City was like a large club. She felt a sudden longing to be a part of some organisation, to work in a factory with a thousand other men and women. Edmee had been right when she said that money was a curse, but she had exaggerated. The Sheilas and the Janes, spread as they were all over England, were not particularly rich, yet they too were cursed with the stifling isolation of the middle classes. Unless the parents made some effort or the girl had a special aptitude she would be left untrained and unfitted even for the primary role of a respectable marriage. And if she was plain, Sarah told herself, she could expect to be left alone, rotting away with boredom and its poisons like a sleepy pear in a musty autumn loft.

The light was fading, and in the west the sky was a translucent green. But Sarah did not notice. She sat motionless, sad and far away, and then she heard a car on the gravelled drive. She ran down the long hall and threw herself into Robert's arms. He asked her what she had been doing, puzzled by her intensity.

"I'll show you." She kissed her father. "Do you mind if I take Robert off straight away?" and she took his arm and led him into the lounge. "It's been too dreadful, darling, I've been doing the lists of guests and all father's friends are dead and I haven't got *any*. At least it was dreadful, but it doesn't matter now."

And with Robert next to her and his arm heavy across her shoulders the address books were only lists of names.

(VII)

If the ceremony and reception were to go without a hitch it would not be thanks to Robert or Mr. Valmont: both of them, Sarah and Edmee agreed scornfully over their bedroom champagne, were useless.

"And God knows where he got to last night. If you can think of anything more unnatural, he took himself off and got drunk alone. So I gather. I could hardly get a word out of him on the phone."

"He's nervous, darling. I'm sorry for you tonight!"

"What's he got to be nervous about? I'm the one who ought to be nervous, I shall be a wreck by the time we get to Rome. He's had nothing whatever to do except stay icy calm."

"Well, Sarah, it doesn't matter. But don't make him feel too big a fool."

"Of course I shan't. I never dreamt it could happen, but to tell you the honest truth I don't care two hoots about tonight. Or ever."

"You've gone too far, but I know what you mean. Did he ever ask . . . anything?"

"Well . . . yes . . . he sort of guessed. Shall we start now?" She stood up and Edmee could tell that she did not intend to say any more. She began to help Sarah through yard after yard of white satin. "How much did Frederick charge for this? He's done it superbly."

"Two hundred. He dared to suggest guineas. To *me*! I told him for that I'd seriously consider leaving him."

"They have no imagination when it comes to money." She picked up a heavy diamond bracelet. "Whatever happens, don't forget to leave most of this behind. It's

beautiful but it's too much for you. Your father must have been thinking of your mother when he bought it. How does he get on with Robert?"

"They honestly do adore each other. I'm sure Daddy's only in a state on Robert's account, not mine. He's with him now up at the club, they're like girls." She sat in front of the triple mirror while Edmee absent-mindedly arranged the folds of the dress. "Sometimes when I watch them together, talking about the diseases and troubles of those beastly lac insects, I don't know whether to be thankful or jealous. It makes me realise what Daddy missed not having a son, and what a bitch I've been in a way."

"Ah well, I shouldn't worry too much. If he had had a son the chances are he would have turned out a pig. Perhaps it is better like this. Do you like Robert's family?"

"The father's all right. I told you about the mother, she's still a cow. And the house in Wimbledon is a horror and the cook does cabbage *à l'anglaise*. But I shan't have to put up with either. I shall never forget your cooking, Edmee."

"I hope not. I hope to see both of you often. With Robert's job you can come to Paris and not feel you're deserting him."

"Of course. And you to Chelsea. The house is nice, isn't it?"

"It's beautiful, not like London at all." She began to unfold the veil. "We're talking too much, it's time to put this on and speak to the servants, they should be leaving for the church soon." Sarah stood up and they kissed, if the careful touching of cheek with cheek could so be called. But only the outward show was a parody.

One of Mr. Valmont's presents had been to charter a plane from Lympe to Rome. As they drove away from the reception Robert's principal worry was that he would be sick on the flight, although such a thing had never happened before. His stomach was sour with champagne, his head ached with nervous strain and fatigue, his mouth still seemed fixed in an idiot grin. He could think of nothing to say, and although he tried to keep awake the deep comfort of the back of the car and the chauffeur's careful driving were too much and he dozed fitfully. Sarah sat upright looking out of the window and the events of the day jumbled through her mind. Though she knew that outwardly Robert had behaved in exactly the same way as most bridegrooms (stiff, inarticulate until he had drunk champagne and then boiling over into heartiness), yet she had never felt more proud of him. Her one wish now was to ease his nervous strain.

Robert was not ill on the plane. Soothed by the familiar smell and sound he fell asleep again. By the end of the flight he was congratulating himself on feeling almost normal. But at their hotel they were subjected to the peculiar archness reserved for such occasions, and once more he became aware of his sour stomach and sweaty hands. Their suite was full of flowers, there was more champagne on ice, the supper was a cold ordeal in aspic, and the double bed turned down in a way that froze him.

While they waited for their luggage to arrive Sarah chatted to the manager, sipped champagne and was actually eating some *canapés* and stuffed olives. But at last the door closed and she came over and kissed him gently.

"You've been wonderful today, Robert. If it hadn't

been for you I should have died of fright. I'm going to have a quick bath and then sleep. I'll run yours for you as soon as I've finished."

They went into the bedroom. Robert sat on the opposite side of the bed and began slowly to unlace his shoes. In a few minutes Sarah walked by with a rustle of silk and shut the door of the bathroom. As though at any minute she might come back and catch him he hurriedly took off his clothes and put on pyjamas and dressing-gown. There could be no question about it, he was impotent. He remembered once saying to Sarah that sex was unimportant. It was still true, he supposed, but the thought was comfortless and he cursed himself for a pompous fool.

By the time he had dispiritedly bathed and cleaned his teeth Sarah was in bed. He saw at a glance that she was not wearing a night-gown.

"I'm going to put out the light . . . Sarah?" He hardly recognised his voice.

"Yes, darling."

In the darkness he leadenly took off the dressing-gown and unbuttoned the pyjama top. The cord of the trousers was knotted, but he tugged violently and it came undone. He got into bed and Sarah moved carefully, resting her head just below his left shoulder, laying her arm across his muscled chest. Without thinking he put his hand under her chin, lifting her head so that he could kiss her mouth. And at the same moment he found that he was not impotent after all.

Nor was there any complexity, only a long oblivion of sleep and wakefulness throughout the night, an insatiable desire to hold each other in each other's arms, to stroke and to touch each other's flesh as delicately as though they were believers and handled holy relics.

(VIII)

Robert was entitled to three weeks' holiday, but they had decided to save a fortnight until later in the year. Sarah raised no objection to the short honeymoon in Capri. Both of them were anxious to move into the house in Chelsea, Robert in particular longed to begin their home life.

The house lay between the King's Road and the river. It was on a corner facing a wide green lined with trees, set in a small walled garden; there were pollarded lime trees, and a weeping-willow hung over a sunken pool of lilies. A large poplar by the front gate made the wall bulge outward, and Sarah was afraid that in the summer-time the living-room would be too dark. The house was small and old, built by some man of limited means who had achieved dignity without fuss.

On one side of the hall was a sitting-room and on the other a dining-room, with a hatch into the kitchen through which Sarah was afraid that private conversation as well as dishes would pass. She knew that at Wimbledon Robert had had a room of his own, and at the back of the house was a small room into which she moved his books and personal belongings. But it was seldom to be used. Upstairs was one large and two smaller bedrooms, a bathroom and lavatory. She had inherited a taste for rich comfort from her father, and was quite unmoved by the decorator's plea for 'a white house, chromium and crystal, like a snow-drift.' She avoided oppressiveness by using indeterminate colours, dull gold, faded rose, pale grey, and had obtained warmth and comfort by the very richness of the materials, the heavy curtains and the thick close carpeting.

She took nothing from Sevenoaks. It was not only that she wished this house to be a point of departure, she also wished to retain intact the place she still thought of as home. The afternoon she had sat alone to make out her list of guests was the first time she had become aware of the possibility of loneliness for herself. The memory of the incident was forgotten but the trace would remain ineradicable. It showed in her resolve to see more of her father than in recent years.

Sarah was well aware that sooner or later, unless she was to change her way of living entirely, Robert would be forced to accept money from her. But she would allow him to find that out in his own time.

When they began to live in Chelsea they agreed that Robert should give her eight pounds a week and keep four for himself. He told her that at the end of the first month they would go through the accounts together. Sarah thought it would be easy to pretend that she had run the house on this sum, or perhaps Robert would forget. But he remembered and she brought out the account books and showed him that the bills had come to just under thirty-two pounds. He studied it carefully while Sarah sat on the edge of the chair, stroking the back of his neck and wishing that she had taken more trouble with the spurious entries.

"You've done wonders, darling, apart from forgetting the butcher, the cleaners, the char's wages and the gardener. I see we used no toilet stuff for a month and you've made no allowance for gas, light, or telephone. The main puzzle to me is how you've managed to work it up to what you have."

"That's easy, drink and cigarettes. Be sensible, Robert. There's no point in living on twelve pounds a week when

we've got nearly sixty, and Daddy keeps agitating to make it a hundred. If you saw my dress bills you couldn't go on bluffing yourself about love in a cottage."

They were silent for a moment and then she went on: "The best thing we can do is to open a joint account and you arrange to have your salary and allowance paid into it, and I'll arrange to pay twelve pounds in as well. You use that for yourself, our holidays, and when we go out. Leave the rest to me. If you find it gets on your nerves, say so. I'm ready to do anything you want and try and like it, but I can't promise that I shan't think it's stupid."

He reached up and held her hand. "No, you're quite right. I'm sorry I've been childish."

For the first month the poignant strangeness of living together was of such delight that they forgot their resolution to resume their previous friendships. Then Sarah suggested a house-warming. They knew that they had sent out too many invitations, but the party was arranged for the first of June and she assured Robert that the weather would be fine and they could open the french windows and overflow on to the lawn. If it looked like rain she would phone Harrods and arrange for a small marquee. In any case there was always the dining-room and the stairs.

It was a beautiful day until Harrods closed, and then the drizzle that began turned quickly into a steady rain. As guest after guest arrived they did overflow into the dining-room: and then the kitchen and Robert's room, up the stairs and into all the bedrooms.

Neither of them enjoyed the party. By the time the last guest had gone the spotless house was a shambles, scarred with burns and stained with drink. Sarah and the char spent all next day washing carpets and polishing out

stains. And no sooner were they recovered from an unspoken feeling that their privacy had in some way been violated (it was far too early for them to see six people sprawled across their double bed, spilling gin and ash) when it was time for Edmee's visit. There were dinner parties and theatres. They took great pleasure in her company and were sorry when she left, but their enjoyment was not comparable to the pleasure when the house once more breathed easily, when on an impulse they could kiss unashamedly in the middle of the sitting-room, speak of personal trivialities of great interest to them but not to Edmee. They relaxed again, only extending or accepting the most casual forms of hospitality.

In the long evenings of June and July they would sit in garden chairs under the willow by the pool, drinking beer as they held hands. Sometimes they would wander down to the river, where the smell of water cooled the hot streets. They would lean on the granite embankment, or cross the bridge and walk with other lovers beneath the dark plane trees in the park. And if they returned the long way home they would stop at one of the Chelsea public-houses facing the river, where it was conventional to sit on the edge of the pavement to drink your beer, but a breach of etiquette to sit on newspaper.

And when they reached the corner of their garden wall he would put his hand in his trouser pocket and bring out the ring of keys, feeling in the darkness for the shape of the latch-key. He had imbued this key with all the qualities of a lucky charm. The air inside the garden was different from the air of the street, heavier yet less oppressive, palpable with the tenderness and privacy yet to come, it would draw them closer together, slow their steps. When he opened the front door the house would

breathe its welcome, the lingering smell of *their* dinner and *their* furniture, traced through with Sarah's scent. And the fifth stair creaked for him but not for her, the switch at the top clicked in a different way from any other switch, the cold-water tap in the bathroom required a special twist if the pipe was not to shudder.

Slowly but surely each was creating spheres of influence in the bedroom. The dressing table all Sarah's, save for the right-hand corner where Robert left his comb. The first long drawer in the chest of drawers Robert's, the glass shelf over the wash-basin Robert's. But the predominating influence was hers, the smell of powder and its dust, the dull gold curtains that when the lamps were lit became the colour of her hair. And it pleased him that it should be so: when he undressed he would put away all his clothes, preferring that the room should show the marks of Sarah.

They had become tired of putting on night-gown and pyjamas, only to take them off and drop them on the floor, and now they habitually wore nothing. Only once a month for three nights would Sarah put on a night-gown, and Robert would smile and wear pyjamas. Already they had learnt to sleep together more restfully than when they had been alone. They slept half-turned towards each other, Sarah's right arm thrust between the pillows and his shoulder, the hollow of his cheek resting lightly against her head. And as the hours passed and the room grew colder Sarah would turn her back and cradle herself against the contours of his body. In those few seconds of consciousness their hands would meet and join across her breasts, their hands would press each other, all the life and feeling of their sleeping bodies would be centred in their hands. Sighing, Sarah would sleep again.

Robert marvelled at the ignorance that had led him to

believe that sex was something capable of being portioned out. But then it was unlike anything he had ever imagined. For him it was hauntingly beautiful, and its enchantment lingered with him all the time, softened his voice, deepened his smile, showed in his eyes. His mind would turn to these moments often, but not lasciviously. For him life seemed filled with a singing simplicity, a heavy and all-pervading weight of happiness, an immeasurable gratitude for the fact of his existence. There was nothing to mar the perfection of his days, no possessiveness, no jealousy, no thought as to whether Sarah loved him as much as he loved her. And this condition stretched on, in his imagination, timelessly. Forever and forever and forever, a glittering paradise of transcendentalising love. For though he had known that in theory love would pass, now he could no longer imagine how it could ever end.

And in the mornings, when the light in the curtains would still be grey and their bodies rested with the deep peace of unlonely sleep, they would awake at the same moment and Sarah would turn and face him. In the dawn light they would look at each other, touch each other, their faces masked with pre-knowledge, experiencing in advance their total union. And when the white release slackened their joined mouths and crushing arms they still lay joined, sleeping dreamlessly until the softly beating bell of Sarah's alarum started another day. It was Sarah who pulled the curtains, and then the magic of the room, but not the happiness, would go.

Robert had asked for his work to be arranged so that he could have each week-end free, and after some difficulty this had been done. He owed the privilege to Michael, who volunteered to forgo his own fortnightly

long week-end in Robert's favour. He was careful not to take advantage of the obligation he had laid on Robert. But he was still their most frequent visitor.

On his own free days, often when Robert would be in Paris, he would phone Sarah and invite himself to tea. Tea would stretch to cocktail time, he would have a few drinks and then apologise for staying late, and leave. Such visits were inexpensive, avoiding as they did any question of taking Sarah out to dinner.

She had quite forgotten her first dislike and now enjoyed his company. At the start of these visits she had watched carefully for any sign that his friendship was motivated more by her than by Robert. But on this score there was no need for Michael to pretend. His interest lay in the fact that she was rich and she was Robert's wife. He revelled in the house and the signs of wealth, anxious to learn such things as why apparently identical china ornaments were of different value. His mind was a question-mark of 'how much?', and sometimes he could think of an excuse for asking.

He thought that it would not be long before Robert grew tired of his present work and joined Mr. Valmont in the City. Perhaps he himself might possibly get a well-paid job with the firm; after all, he was their closest friend. Michael had long forgotten that he had ever thought flying romantic; now the only time it ceased to be boring was when it became dangerous, and Michael was learning that he did not care for danger. Recently he had seen a passenger light a cigarette during a landing, and he had been surprised by his own spurt of vicious anger.

His guess that Robert might soon consider joining Mr. Valmont was only premature by a few weeks. In the

middle of July, when Mr. Valmont was spending a night at Chelsea, he had complained that his principal assistant had accepted a consignment of sheet lac which was of inferior colour.

"It's not really Emmanuel's fault. He's getting on and unless you've eyes like a hawk it's very difficult. You ought to join me, Robert, I need a young man. Emmanuel and I are too old to go traipsing off to India and keeping an eye on Patras at Bandhu. You'd love the place, I'm sure. Jungle and hills, plenty of weird birds and insects. And the women don't bother to dress above the waist. Sarah would have to go with you."

Robert laughed and made some non-committal remark. But it did attract him; he could visualise jungle and mountains, buildings like the Taj Mahal and sacred cows with golden horns being improbably dragged beneath the waters of the Ganges by crocodiles. His visualisation was inaccurate, as he knew, but he had always been drawn to the strange and the exotic, and names like Krakatoa and Bangkok, Mandalay and Malabar, rose in his mind. The idea stayed and slowly grew. He enjoyed his present work and had always pitied those who worked in offices, but this would be very different. He had already heard enough to know that most of his time would be spent examining cargo in the docks, visiting different factories. And the yearly visits to India, now falling into abeyance, usually occupied at least three months.

But even more important than this was his thought that by joining Mr. Valmont he could in some degree discharge his obligations to him. And at the beginning of August he told Sarah that he would phone her father and arrange to lunch with him and discuss the matter.

"That's wonderful, darling! Are you sure you've thought it out carefully? Supposing you hate it?"

"I shan't. Besides, that's not so important, what's more to the point is that I have to give three months' notice to end my contract, and by that time anything might have happened."

"How do you mean? Not that bore Hitler? He's just bluffing, he'll climb down at the last minute."

"I wouldn't like to bet on it. And if there's a war I would be called up at once." He had been standing by the open windows as he talked, and now he came back into the room. "Will you have some sherry, Sarah?"

It was only half-past five and she looked up in surprise. "If you want one. Have I done something wrong?"

"Of course not, why should you think that?" As he walked slowly to the sideboard he did not notice her smile. "There is one other thing I've been thinking. If war does come it would terribly complicate things if we had a child, wouldn't it? I mean, no one really knows what it's going to be like, but there's bound to be bombing. At the minute we're simply sitting up and begging for it to happen, the child I mean. I'm surprised it hasn't already. Don't you think we ought to do something?" He came back with the glasses.

"Oh Robert, it's such a bore. Must we?"

"I think we ought to for the time being, I've begun to worry about it. It wouldn't hurt for a bit, we're not exactly decrepit."

"Supposing you got killed?" She almost smiled as she said the unimaginable words.

"Supposing you did too, having a child in circumstances we can't even visualise?"

"All right, Robert, if you're worried."

"So . . .? Sarah . . .?"

She looked up at him and he glanced quickly down, but not before she correctly interpreted the cause of his

embarrassment. "Leave it to me, darling," she said stretching out her hand. "I'll see Murlieux and fix everything, don't give it another thought." But they were both depressed, and drank an unusual amount of sherry.

During that August, as he listened to his friends and the men with whom he worked, he realised that although they said war was horrible and to be avoided, yet secretly most of them looked forward to its outbreak. He tried to understand this attitude, but even after taking into consideration all the more obvious reasons that are put forward for man's liking of war he was still baffled. He finally decided that it was only explicable on the grounds of a monstrous egotism in each individual. Deep in their hearts, never even tacitly admitted, few people could imagine that they themselves would be killed or maimed, and they could view the mutilation or death of others with equanimity. It was another facet of pride, that fundamental flaw; of regarding oneself (correctly) as unique, but never considering, not even knowing, that every other human being was unique as well.

Robert would have hated the thought of war even if he had not been so deeply in love. But he tried, with some success, to be detached. He regarded a long separation from Sarah like death itself; but death was a fact which would one day take place. And so with the approaching war. It was too late, probably it was always too late. In his opinion the cries for the brotherhood of man, for the removal of this economic ill and that ideological mistake, were useless, like attempts to stanch a mortal wound by mopping the blood from the floor. Only someone who could heal the flaw in the nature of man was worth listening to.

In the meantime there were a few things he could do

to safeguard his future life with Sarah. He decided that if war came she should go to Sevenoaks. It never occurred to him that she should leave the country, and if it had been suggested he would have rejected it at once. He did not know the true reason for this, and to voice the superficial ones would have been too embarrassing. But his roots were fixed for all time in England, and even his urge for strange lands stemmed from this; it was not only the obvious wish to see beauty and acquire knowledge, his very rootedness touched the rest of the world with something of the yearning quality of exile.

He did not think very much about his own reactions when faced with war as a reality. He was unafraid now, whether he would stay unafraid he did not know.

Mostly he thought of these things when the roar of the plane's engines enveloped him in silence; they only came to him with difficulty and he was afraid that if he tried to form them into words they would be lost or somehow damaged. He did not discuss them with Sarah; in any case when they were together he was too busy hoarding a store of memories that in the time to come he could take out and handle. He found that there were many things about her that he did not know or incomprehensibly had not noticed: her habit of running her middle finger along her scarred eyebrow and across her temple, her mother's name, to whom she had given her first love and under what circumstances. It must have been in circumstances of unearthly beauty, he was certain. In a grotto by the sea, like the blue grotto at Capri only far more lovely, lying in some exquisite shell, laced with foam and roped with pearls . . . but where Sarah was concerned he would have found the frowsy sofa marked with undergraduate hair oil, the pot of Marmite and the congealing crumpets just as beautiful.

At eleven o'clock on the first Sunday of September they listened in silence to the declaration of war. It was a lovely day and Sarah opened some champagne and they sat in the garden. They stayed there when the sirens sounded, moving their chairs closer together and closer to the willow. Later they walked to their usual public-house and talked with strangers until closing time. When they came home they ate cold meat, bread and cheese, and then went upstairs to sleep off the wine and beer. They did not undress, but lay in their accustomed way beneath the eiderdown.

And before they fell asleep Robert hoped that Sarah would not speak. He was afraid that the sound of her voice would change his desolation into tears.

BOOK TWO

(I)

ON the evening of the third day after the declaration of war Robert and Michael left London to report to an RAF training centre for officers outside Gloucester. Michael had asked if he could come to Chelsea on his way to Paddington, and had seemed so subdued, pathetic almost, that even if Robert had wanted to go alone with Sarah to the station he would not have had the heart to refuse. As it was, he thought that a third person would ease their parting, and Michael's presence would allow her to feel that at least he was going away with a friend.

For Sarah the three days had been so strange, so busy, that it seemed as though the war had already been in progress a long time. On the Monday morning Mr. Valmont had arrived at Chelsea soon after Robert had left to report at Croydon. No sooner had she kissed him than she burst into tears, without really knowing for whom or why. When it was over she was surprised, for during the last months she had forgotten the existence of tears.

Her father tried to persuade her that as soon as Robert was called up she should return to Sevenoaks. But Sarah was determined that, whatever he or Robert said, she would not do this, at least for the time being. Within the few months they had been at Chelsea their house had become her home, loved and familiar. She argued that in London she would be more accessible for Robert, but

secretly she could not bear to lose both him and the house at the same stroke; as long as she stayed in their home he would not seem so remote.

There was to be only one other moment before Robert left when Sarah almost gave way to the tears which she knew would only hurt him. She was in the sitting-room on the Wednesday evening, looking into the garden and wondering how soon she would have to use the kennel-like shelter. She heard Robert come down the stairs and as the door opened she turned and saw him in his uniform for the first time. She stared at him, hardly able to believe that this stranger was her husband, experiencing a rush of love and pride, sorrow and eroticism. It made him appear so much younger and more vulnerable; it took away maturity and individuality. And this air of 'defencelessness' was emphasised by his own attitude, a mixture of pride and shyness and an unconscious wish for her approval as he pulled at the ill-fitting blue cloth. At the very moment that she was aware of eroticism it turned into a desire to protect, a longing to take his place and die for him.

But all she did was to laugh and tell him he looked wonderful.

"Turn round, darling. I wish you had tried this on last night." She tugged at a fold of cloth in the small of his back. "I could have taken the seam in here . . . and it's so rough, don't you itch all over? You had better find out who's the proper tailor for the RAF uniforms before you become an officer. Or I will, and he can take your measurements from a suit." And then they kissed, and she smelt for the first time the strange mixture of wool and metal-polish, felt the metal buckle of his belt press against her.

Robert had been right when he thought that it would be easier for Sarah to see him leave with Michael. When he arrived she greeted him more warmly than ever before, and for the first time on meeting kissed him, jokingly saying how much better his uniform looked than Robert's.

"Come and have a drink, it's not worth eating before your train. I've packed you up food for the journey, for Heaven's sake don't let me forget it. Have you seen your parents? I had to drive Robert out of the house this morning to make him go and see his."

"No, I haven't, it's too far. Personally I think the whole thing stinks, but I suppose we've just got to put up with it." He sounded so morose that Sarah quickly gave him a large drink, and slowly he became more cheerful.

A little later Robert looked at his watch. "Do you mind if we take a cab instead of the car, Sarah?"

She smiled, knowing that he wanted to sit and hold her hand, feel the comfort of her leaning body. She phoned to Sloane Square for a taxi and the two men carried out their kitbags. As Robert shut the front gate he wanted to go back once more and stand in the empty hall. It was light as they drove to Paddington and men were still digging in the squares and parks. Every so often Robert would remind Sarah of the things she had to do: buy candles, put food in the shelter, watch the black-out and, above all, leave London as soon as air raids started.

The station was crowded with men in uniform, awkwardly carrying kitbags and clumping heavily in their unaccustomed boots. Already there was a rash of arrowed notices pointing to the R.T.O. or the N.A.A.F.I., adding to Sarah's confusion at being involved in what appeared a wholly military occasion, separating her still

more from Robert. Then, in the confusion of uniforms and noise and smoke, with a background of music as some draft of men began to sing 'Roll Out the Barrel', in the gloom of the station as the light outside died, Robert and Sarah kissed good-bye. She stood near the barrier, knowing that he would turn once more before her face was too blurred by distance, and that then she must go.

Outside the station she felt lost and desolate. The thought of returning to the empty house at this early hour was repugnant. She took a taxi and went to the public-house which she and Robert used in Chelsea. It seemed easier to take her misery to the impersonal ears of Harry than to one of her friends. She knew that her misery was so commonplace that hardly anyone would be able to listen without boredom. Except Harry, who was a good barman and managed to suggest interest in everyone's troubles, provided he was not too busy and the teller not too drunk. And if she suddenly walked out or sat at a table to be alone, it would not occur to Harry to think her odd.

She sat at the bar for a long time, looking at a paper, listening to the nine-o'clock news, telling Harry how she had seen Robert off and how well he looked in uniform. Harry said that he was sorry not to have seen Mr. Middleton and it certainly made you think, didn't it. Sarah agreed.

She drank much more than usual that night, partly because she was determined to lose no time in going to sleep, partly from a human feeling that the occasion was dramatic and called for some gesture on her part. Then she realised that she was ravenously hungry, she said good night and walked home. As soon as the front door shut and the silence of the house sang in her ears she was very glad she had drunk so much.

The next morning she could not see how she would be able to get through even one day without Robert, but at twelve-thirty he phoned from a call-box in the camp and after a disjointed conversation promised to phone again at seven. She was so elated by the sound of his voice and his promise to call again that in the afternoon she went to a film and found to her surprise that she was still capable of an occasional moment of enjoyment. And as the days passed she discovered, also to her surprise, that what Harry had said one evening about life going on was actually true. The major cataclysm of Robert's departure trailed off into a distance-deadened rumble. There were his daily telephone calls and the long letters three times a week; then the news that at the end of the first month he would be given a week-end pass.

For this Sarah drove down to Gloucester to meet him, not wishing to lose a minute of his thirty-six hours. They did not talk very much as they returned to London. All their news had been passed on and at this moment both of them were curiously shy. Sarah had brought an elaborate cold lunch with her, carefully selected for its eatability whilst driving. But he was not as hungry as she had expected. As she drove he put his right hand beneath her hair, stroking her bare neck, and the touch of his shaking fingers spread through all her body.

(II)

Robert was in the first group to be commissioned, and he and Michael, on account of their previous experience, were posted as pilot-officer instructors to a fighter training unit near Salisbury. He was granted ten days' leave before Christmas and spent the first week alone with

Sarah in Chelsea. Then they went to Sevenoaks, returning on Boxing Day to pick up her luggage.

Sarah had persuaded him that it would be good for both of them if she stayed at the Red Lion in Salisbury. Although he was quite happy about this decision because it was Sarah's wish, in a way he would have preferred to come to London each week-end for the privacy that their own home gave them. But already the incessant company of other men was having a dual effect on him, increasing his always pronounced wish for privacy yet destroying his power to relax when the opportunity came. It was as though the constant presence of men always about him, eating or sleeping, working or playing, created a new atmosphere without which he was ill at ease, like a man born by the sea fretting when away from the sound of waves. The process had only just started. A few months earlier he would have rebelled violently at the thought of seeing Sarah for week-ends in a hotel; now the idea no longer seemed so impossible.

When he had first gone away Sarah had been satisfied, to some extent, with his phone calls, letters, the prospect of seeing him once a month. But by the end of his time at Gloucester she had found the position both too much and not enough. She had tried to express her love in letters, but the words she used seemed pale ghosts of what was in her heart, and the fruitless efforts to breathe life into them three times a week discouraged her. She had been tied to the house each evening, by her own wish, waiting for him to phone, and afterwards the evening was empty and finished except to eat alone and go to bed. In fact she would eat and then go to the Roebuck, where by now she was well known and could usually rely on finding acquaintances, mostly other women in the same position as herself. She liked them and they

were pleasant, but in reality they bored one another, and Sarah was beginning to slip into the habit of taking refuge from boredom in drink. There was nothing excessive about this. Not once in Robert's absence, except for the night he went away, had she been more than pleasantly exhilarated and the edge of boredom removed.

But after a time that in itself had begun to pall, and the shortening days lengthened her loneliness. She tried all the usual palliatives, reading, the cinema, having friends to the house, but she could not break through the barrier of Robert's absence, tingeing all activities with a grey futility. Her daily woman had left and Sarah did her own housework. Mrs. Batchly, the cook, who had been living with her married daughter in Battersea, now slept in, for Sarah had found that by herself she could hardly be bothered to cook at all, and having someone else sleeping in the house did make it seem a little less lonely. But even the housework was finished by lunch-time and then the rest of the day, apart from Robert's call, stretched hostilely ahead.

When she heard that he was to be posted near Salisbury she was determined to go. She would probably be able to see him several times a week, drive out and bring him back for tea or dinner. He might even be given a sleeping-out pass.

"I'm very curious to meet Michael's fiancée. Mary who did you say she was?"

"Grenfell. I think you'll like her. She's no beauty, but very pleasant. I want you to look after her, don't forget you're meant to be her chaperone."

"I should think she'd be quite safe with Michael, he doesn't strike me as being much of a womaniser. Has she got any money?"

"I think her parents are fairly well off. Her father's a

doctor in Gloucester. I daresay he might give her a hundred and fifty a year. Why? Do you think that might be the attraction?"

"Perhaps, but not if she's only got that. When he used to come to Chelsea he had a way of handling things as though he expected them to be valuable and therefore beautiful. Of course, he doesn't know the difference between Meissen and a Present from Margate. Not that that matters, but you shouldn't try and pretend. And if she's really plain . . . but still . . . maybe I've got a nasty mind."

"He's a bit close with money, but so are lots of people."

"It's funny, darling, but I find it almost impossible to tell what people are going to do in certain circumstances. Take Michael. I'm fond of him, he's incredibly loyal to you, I've seen quite a lot of him. I thought I knew him, but why was he odd at the beginning of the war? Was he afraid? Did he like his job? Does he hate change? I just haven't an idea."

"'Clue' is the correct term in the raf. I wouldn't really know either, but he's changed again since then. You make a mistake thinking that once people reach twenty-one their characters set like jelly. Some do, most people change all the time. You've changed enormously in a year—why, I almost like you now. But as far as Michael's concerned he wasn't upset because he liked his job, he was one of the few people I knew who was bored by it. Even if he was afraid, there'd be nothing wrong in that. I do hope you haven't packed a bundle of white feathers. For all you know I might have a yellow streak in me a mile wide."

"No. I admit I don't know you like I should, but Edmee once said you had a quality of goodness about you and she was right."

"You're talking through the back of your lovely neck.

Do you want me to drive? We seem to be getting nowhere in a great deal of time."

"Oh, shut up, Robert. Light me a cigarette." She settled down in the seat and began to concentrate on the icy roads.

Michael himself had forgotten why he was depressed at the beginning of the war. It would be almost true to say that he never knew, so quickly had he wiped the moment of truth from his mind. But in that moment, as his imagination pinned him in some blazing plane, screaming above the roar of flames, he had felt terror black his mind.

He was ashamed of this in exactly the same way as he was ashamed of his persistent habit of masturbation; and the identical explanation occurred to him, that 'if you really got down to brass tacks' everybody was in the same boat. It did not constitute a disgrace until it became known. He did not so much ignore his knowledge, he deprived it of significance by camouflaging it with a quick raking of excuses. Fear was natural and would vanish in action; it proved that his imagination was too vivid, that his real flair obviously lay in administration.

Michael had the facility of hallucinating himself at will into a given role, and it was this that made him dangerous and almost impossible to understand. Having decided that he was more suited to administration, the next logical step for Michael was to begin to doubt his own physical ability to fly. Thus he would ask another cadet at what altitude he began to need oxygen, and if he said 'nineteen thousand' Michael would tell him enviously that he was lucky.

But what he most wanted was to have it both ways: to

earn the reputation of a hero by one brief and glorious encounter and thereafter, thanks to a wound received in the action, to be grounded.

When he started at Gloucester his first concern was to be liked, his second to get on well with his instructors. It was their comments which would eventually decide his future employment; and they had the ordering of many fatigues, some of which were most unpleasant. But to be liked by both cadets and instructors was not easy. Soon after his arrival he heard a cadet being discussed in the crudest terms for doing too openly what he himself hoped to do. Michael solved the problem by saying how lucky it was that he found his instructors so likeable, in spite of being instructors. This lent his talks with them a purely democratic air. And he was extremely discreet about the way he sometimes stayed behind to ask additional questions after a parade had been dismissed. Nor did he buy them too much beer at the weekly all-ranks dance.

It was at one of these dances, after a chance remark of one of the instructors, that Michael decided to marry. He was trying to make a good impression by expressing the hope that he would be posted to a fighter squadron. They laughed.

"You'll soon have enough of that stuff and wish you were married."

"What difference would that make?"

"Well, I dunno, but it's always a good thing to be married in the Forces, specially our lot. If there's a dirty job being handed out naturally a single bloke's a bit more likely to cop it. That's only decent. Besides, think of the good it'd do your nerves, a nice donkey ride on the missus when you get back from ops!" And at once the talk branched off down its usual well-beaten track.

But it was true, Michael reflected, at least to the extent that being married would be a help rather than a hindrance. And pleasant too. He'd be twenty-four next month, and although there was nothing wrong, it really was about time he put an end to that Saturday night lark. As he looked at the gymnasium packed with couples he was envious, he remembered how happy Robert and Sarah were, and the smashing house in Chelsea. It would be pleasant having someone to care deeply for him, to come back to after all the horrors; he would make some woman a good husband.

The chain of thought was in motion: Michael was beginning to look for a wife.

He met Mary in a cinema to which he had gone with Robert. They were sitting in the more expensive seats and he found himself next to a girl with a pleasant enough face. He liked to show his ease of manner, and during the interval he spoke to her, learning that her father was a local doctor. When the programme was over he asked her if she would have a drink with them. Mary, secretly attracted by Robert and affected by the first flush of enthusiasm for the Forces, agreed. She soon learnt that Robert was married, and in order to soothe the small ache of her disappointment she invested Michael with some of the glamour through which she had first seen Robert. Enough anyway to accept Michael's invitation to the next dance in the camp.

Michael was in a hurry to look at her home and find out whether he was wasting his time. Once he had seen that her mother and father were beyond reproach on the score of gentility, that they were prosperous and there was only one brother in the Navy to share her prospects, he decided that she would make a suitable wife. He could not hallucinate himself that he was in love, but

he did achieve the belief that it would probably come with marriage. And if he wanted his freedom when the war was over, then of course he would do what a lot of people would be doing, getting rid of each other on the grounds that the marriage had been a war-induced mistake.

At the start Mary saw him as a pleasant personality with a particularly charming friend. She was only a year younger than Michael and she knew that she was plain. So far no man had been in love with her and she doubted whether anyone would. She also knew from experience that a plain girl, whilst young, has many opportunities to be promiscuous, that some men believe such girls are eager to snatch at any opportunity, both for the pleasure itself and in the vague hope that something permanent might come of it. Mary resented this attitude deeply, and to begin with viewed Michael with suspicion.

For the first month each time they met she half expected it to be the last, for convention did not permit her to issue invitations, other than to an occasional meal at home. Quite swiftly her gratitude at being neither molested nor dropped turned her liking into love and they became engaged a fortnight before the end of the course. The only awkward moment was when Mrs. Grenfell suggested meeting his parents, but he managed to convince her that he had quarrelled with them and had cut himself adrift completely.

Michael seized the first opportunity at a dance to tell the instructors and introduce Mary. It would be just about now, he thought, that they would be preparing their reports. He hoped that the choice of this sensible girl would impress them, and it gave him an excellent excuse to put his hand deeply into his pocket and ply them with drink.

The instructors never gave his choice of wife a moment's

thought. But when they stood in front of the adjutant racking their brains for some alternative expression to "Oh, he's all right," one or two of them did remember his recent largesse and managed to convey a faint impression that Huyelk was an individual. They could recall vaguely that he had seemed interested during instruction. He was reported on as a natural leader with an outstanding personality, his technical ability much above average coupled with great willingness to learn.

Michael did not see this report, but the gist was passed on to him by one of the orderly-room sergeants. He was not entirely pleased; how could they have failed to notice where his chief ability lay?

Having become engaged he was in no hurry to marry. That was a strategic event not to be squandered lightly. The continuing inactivity in Europe dulled his sense of danger, there now seemed no urgency in presenting himself as someone conceivably requiring special consideration. He told Mary that a long engagement would compensate for a short courtship. But he thought that it would do no harm if she came to Salisbury and met some of his brother officers. He was also anxious that she should meet and be impressed by Sarah. He was a little uncomfortable about such matters as her clothes and make-up, and hoped that if he dropped a hint to Sarah she might help her over these details.

Mary arrived at Salisbury the day after Sarah. They liked each other immediately, Mary in particular seeing in Sarah the ideal wife for Robert. She had not forgotten that she had first been drawn to him, nor was she ashamed of this although, of course, it was something she would never tell Michael. She promised herself the pleasure of telling Sarah, as soon as their friendship became as intimate as Mary knew it would.

(III)

For several days after reporting to their new unit neither man was able to leave the camp. But Sarah was content. Knowing that she would see him at the very least once a week she felt that it would not fret her unduly if she only saw him once a month. And she liked the old hotel, with its courtyard and its very English comfort. It was used a great deal by both the Army and the RAF and she began to identify herself with uniforms, looking coldly at civilians until Robert noticed and laughed at her. But his laughter did not change the fact that she was now in close contact with the indefinable atmosphere of wartime companionship and felt its strange attraction; a sense of unity with others that she had not previously found in her life, but for which she hungered.

On the first Sunday morning Robert and Michael arrived at eleven o'clock and they all gathered in Sarah's bedroom to drink beer. She was curious to see how he would behave with Mary, and she was surprised by the quiet air he gave of a solid love, as though they had already been married a long time. There was no rapture, no shyness in front of others, but he was attentive and affectionate, jumping up to fetch her an ashtray, putting his arm round her shoulders and holding her close while he talked. She half expected him to call her 'old girl' and then reproved herself for being uncharitable.

After lunch she suggested that Michael should use her car and take Mary for a drive. Then she and Robert went upstairs. When they were in bed and had moved into each other's arms he whispered: "I wish it was nighttime, darling. I prefer the night."

"Do you?" She was amused. "This seems good enough to me."

He almost told her that it was the long hours of enveloping darkness that he wanted, but she kissed him and he forgot. Later in the afternoon, when they had slept briefly and awoken and made love again, Sarah put on her dressing-gown and rang for tea. Then they propped themselves up with pillows, smoking and talking.

"You're dropping crumbs in the bed, darling. I've got to sleep here tonight."

"Won't the girl make it again?"

"Yes, but they never get crumbs out. What's Amesbury like, really like?"

"It's O.K. There's quite a lot to do. But I shan't be able to see you as much as I'd like. I don't think there's any chance of a sleeping-out pass, senior married officers only get Saturday night. But we'll see."

"How long will this job last, a long time?"

"I don't know, and I think 'not knowing' is going to be my permanent state of mind for the duration. No one ever knows anything. I can see how it becomes a rather nice disease, with no decisions left to you except to go on breathing. It suffocates me, but I expect I shall give in to it sooner or later."

"But you just said there's quite a lot to do. And you can't say it isn't a responsible job, teaching other people how to fly. Quite apart from seeing that they don't kill themselves you should feel responsible for me."

"I do, darling. Terribly responsible. I'm only relaxing now and being rather silly. I can't quite express what I feel about it. There's a part of me that finds this sort of existence terribly attractive, and another part that sees it all based on nothing."

"But at some time or another it might become dreadful for you. You'd be crazy not to enjoy this while you can. *I'm* going to, I'd never stop kicking myself if . . . if I didn't."

"Perhaps you're right. I didn't mean to make a drama out of it, let's just take it easy." He stubbed out his cigarette. "I think I ought to get up and have a bath. I forgot to mention this morning that some of the officers are coming in tonight to have a drink with us. Do you mind?"

"Of course I don't, it will be nice. Shall I get myself up rather, for them?"

Robert looked at her for a long moment, cupping her chin in his hand. She gazed back at him, her question quite forgotten. They were both thinking that they could never tire of each other's beauty, never cease to be in love. Then Robert smiled.

"Yes, darling. It's not really fair but go ahead, give them the works."

In the future it was from that evening Sarah dated time, the beginning of the war. Almost she could pinpoint the very moment. Mary and Michael, she and Robert, sitting at a table near the fire in the lounge. And though Robert was there, though she was both happy and secure, yet shadows lay just beyond the swinging doors, the curtained windows. And then four officers came into the lounge. Robert stood up. They were introduced, fetched chairs; the conversation was difficult, deliberately bright until the second round of drinks was finished. Suddenly they were all talking naturally, speaking with warmth of personal things. It was as though glassy barriers ceased to exist. There was no sentiment nor, in spite of the amount drunk before and after dinner, was it directly caused by drink. Its exact flavour eluded Sarah, was too subtle for her analysis and in a way too masculine. Moreover, although it was to become a familiar atmosphere, each time she breathed it there would be some

faintly different flavour either stemming from herself or others. But now she had eaten lotus: in retrospect the time ahead was to seem always afternoon. It was not to save her from periods of desiccating boredom or from the deep cancer of anxiety that was to flare and fade and flare again concerning Robert's safety, but it ran like a stream through an arid land.

This new and so satisfying ease of communication with others sometimes spoilt good manners. But her love for Robert seemed to have restored a lost innocence. She scarcely noticed the innuendos, the touching knee beneath the table, the suggestive fingers in a handshake. Most men, warned by her lack of response, desisted. Those that did not suddenly found themselves faced with an icy and contemptuous stare far more humiliating than anger.

Considering the wartime freedom of behaviour among people of their own age and circumstances these incidents were infrequent. Quite apart from the fact that most men sensed they were wasting their time if they expected more than friendship, only the crassest could ignore the threat of Robert's presence. It was not that he showed possessiveness, for as long as she was in the same room, at the same table, Robert was happy. Their love for each other lent their behaviour in public a touchingly formal informality, almost as if their liaison was a secret not to be divulged by the too quick lighting of her cigarette, nor by her hand resting on his forearm, the tips of her fingers touching his wrist. Yet in other ways they constantly betrayed themselves, unconsciously searching each other out, listening for the sound of the other's voice.

This awareness was no new thing, but that first evening marked the beginning of a change. From now on there appeared no alternative between the extremes of meeting

alone in the privacy of their bedroom or being surrounded by a crowd. That could have been avoided, but since the outbreak of the war both of them had fallen more deeply in love with life as well as with each other; they had no wish to resist the sudden flow of vitality which was palpably around them. It gave their meetings, whether alone or in a crowd, an added poignancy.

A fortnight later, immediately after Mary had returned to Gloucester, another event brought about a change in Sarah's regard for Robert. A new friend of theirs was killed, the accident happening in the usual incomprehensible way of such accidents. One minute he was standing in front of a plane about to take off, smiling up at the pilot, and then he moved forward and to one side and pieces of skull and brain splattered mechanics standing fifteen yards away.

That occurred on Friday afternoon, and Robert was off duty from midday Saturday until midnight. He said nothing to Sarah until after lunch and they were undressing in the bedroom. He smiled a little, inwardly, at the macabre way in which they were about to make love, but the smile only touched his mouth with sadness. He would have preferred to mention the matter casually at lunch and then for Sarah to have forgotten, but this was her first casualty and he was afraid how she would accept it. He had learnt that during their moments of intimacy she was most malleable.

"Sarah."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid there was a bad thing at the aerodrome yesterday. Henry was killed. It was his own fault, a stupid accident."

"Oh Robert! Don't say it like that! How dreadful!"

"It *was* stupid. Sooner or later a lot of people we know are going to get damaged through no fault of their own, they're the people you ought to save your sympathy for." Secretly Robert thought that Henry's death, pointless, imbecile, almost selfish, was far more worthy of tears. But that was unimportant. He kissed her.

"Did his plane crash?"

"No. He let himself get hit on the head by a propeller."

"How ghastly!" She tried to stop herself from imagining the scene, whether half his face had been sheared off, whether he had died instantly. The thought of sleeping with Robert that afternoon seemed monstrous, as though their knowledge would dapple the sheets with blood, but at the same time she knew that she would, that she wanted to, that their nakedness would be an anodyne.

She lay still in his arms, listening to the beat of her heart echoing his heart beating. She closed her eyes to his lips; drifting. She could feel all his nakedness against her, yet in another way she did not feel it; she could smell only his hair, the skin of his face and the warm breath of their bodies, hear only the sound of the pillow against which he pressed her head. And then, dropping through the pale January sky, filtering through the window and the half-drawn curtains, no sooner heard than beginning to fade again into the outer air, came the far-away sound of a plane; so lazy, so faint, that it touched the room with summer. And their wet mouths met in time to hush the faint sound she would have made as their bodies coupled.

Outwardly at least their act of love was not emphasised that afternoon. Passion came naturally to both, and apart from the first few weeks of marriage and within certain limits which neither wished to pass they were habitually uninhibited. For Sarah her crisis had always been the culmination, the true end. (She did not realise how fortu-

nate she was to achieve this end each time with Robert, nor that it was only brought about by his passionate tenderness and restraint.) Then, in the past, when consciousness slowly returned that they were two bodies and not one, she would go to sleep; Robert, who did not want to sleep, would patiently refrain from stroking her still, loved body.

But this afternoon, as she slowly opened her eyes, feeling her lashes brush against Robert's, withdrawing her open mouth from his, edging a little to one side to relieve herself of the weight of his body, she did not want to sleep. She was suddenly conscious of his body in a way that he had always been of hers. Of course she had known that it was beautiful: and had known it, by her caresses, in its total intimacy. But her knowledge had been of a dream-like quality, and now it was sword-sharp. It was *now* that she wanted to know this stranger's body, while her mind was crystalline and her own body hardly existed, lay empty and purged, touched by a small warm death.

She ran her fingers down his arm until she could hold his hand. His hands were well-shaped and yet, she thought, how curiously thick the palm of a human hand is, when I press like this. And his fingers, how stiff and inarticulate they are, yet when I press my fingertips against his I can feel the faint answering pressure push against all my shoulder. And the curve of his side, the exquisite texture of the skin, the mingled hardness of ribs and muscle, the pad of muscle above his breast. How much more beautiful his body is than mine, even his face is more beautiful, more human, less a mask. All this is *mine*, only *I* can run my hand across his stomach, stroke his body, touch his lips with the tip of my tongue. . . . And yet these first moments of real possession were shot through with a new awareness of his separateness, his uniqueness as a human being.

And though she did not think of Henry, yet death had ceased to be an accepted abstraction and had become an accepted reality. But of this she was hardly aware, for over the preceding months death had slowly formed its wings in the chrysalis of her mind, and its emergence that afternoon was both too inevitable and natural to be a cause of horrified wonder. Even so it was not to be looked at too closely: a Gorgon that would turn her heart to stone. And so instead she looked on Robert, filling her mind with his body. It was strange to love something capable of so great a treachery as removing Robert from her for ever, for as she looked she thought, lazily, that there was not one but three Roberts. There was his body and his mind and his uniqueness; so unique that she (if nobody else) would be able to recognise him by the shape of a fingernail.

That afternoon was forgotten, swamped by her daily life, the press of friends and her own happiness. The weeks fell away and instead of warning her that time was passing and change was the essence of time, they lulled her into a belief that it would go on for ever. Even the invasion of Norway caused no more than a ripple of uncase. And when Belgium and Holland were overrun she still saw no reason why this should touch Robert, telling herself that instructors would be needed more than ever as casualties mounted. As the disasters multiplied she was distressed and worried, but only externally.

One evening in the middle of May she was about to leave her bedroom and go to the lounge when she heard someone stop outside her door and Robert's voice saying "It's me, darling." Usually he phoned and asked the porter to take a message if he was coming in

unexpectedly, and this break in routine chilled her.

"Why didn't you phone, Robert?"

"I didn't have time, I was just going to and someone in a hurry offered me a lift. Can we eat early? I've got to be back by nine."

"Why? Is anything special happening?"

"Yes . . . yes. I'm being sent to France with a draft of officers. Look," he held out his arm and she saw the newly-sewn-on rank of flying officer.

"Robert! Oh God!" Although she was shocked she managed to sound as though she had merely laddered a favourite pair of stockings. There was a tray with bottles and glasses on a table and she turned away and poured out two gin and Frenches.

"When do you go?"

"We're being flown over very early tomorrow. I've got to get back because I'm in charge of the draft."

"Whereabouts?"

"Oh, a long way back, south of Paris. There's no need to worry." He knew that the aerodrome they were going to was only a clearing centre, but he saw no point in telling Sarah.

"Why on earth are you being sent, you're an instructor?"

"I don't know any more than you, darling, and I can't picture myself asking the adjutant what the hell he means by it. It seems reasonable to me that they should want experienced flyers right now. I've had a pretty good innings here already."

"You didn't volunteer, did you? If so I'll never speak to you again."

"You must be out of your mind, Sarah, doing what I'm told is a full-time job for me. Stop worrying, because it won't help. Just think, I shall probably get a chance to see Edmee soon. What would you like to do, stay here

or go to Sevenoaks? You haven't seen the old man for months."

"Yes, perhaps, for a week or two. Then I'll come back. You might be sent back here, mightn't you?"

By a great effort Robert managed to keep impatience out of his voice. These questions, and all the ones that were waiting their turn in Sarah's mind, he had already asked of himself a dozen times. To try and plan ahead was only an exasperation.

"I simply don't know, my sweet. It's useless asking questions. I'll write as often as possible and tell you as much as I can. You do the same. As long as your father and Mrs. B know your movements I can always get in touch with you if I come back unexpectedly. I'll write to Mother from France, you keep away from her. Now let's have dinner, I'm starving."

"Is Michael going?"

"Yes, he's calling here after eight and you can run us back."

Sarah finished her drink and as they went downstairs she tried to adjust herself to the news. She well understood Robert's suppressed impatience at futile questions, their very unanswerability would lead them like will-o'-the-wisps into a morass of danger. She smiled at their usual waiter and sat down. Suddenly she resented finding herself in the stock role of the stoical wife, trying to discuss his move as though it was only a tiresome week-end. But what else? she asked herself. Be petulant, morbid, pin on a bravely smiling mask? Each would be as false as stoicism, but more repellent.

There was roast lamb to eat and they drank a bottle of Châteauneuf du Pape. They enjoyed dinner; most of the time was spent discussing their house, whether it would be practical to turn Robert's downstairs room and

the sitting-room into one large room, and how they could improve the garden. But when Michael arrived Sarah immediately felt as if she had eaten too much, and told the waiter to take away her plate.

"Hullo, Michael, you're early."

"Hullo, Sarah, I'm awfully sorry, am I butting in?"

"Not at all, you're just in time for a brandy and some coffee. Robert?"

"Yes, please."

Michael glanced quickly round and then lowered his voice. "What do you think of the move, Sarah?"

She felt uncomfortable, not wishing to discuss it again, particularly in front of Michael. She glanced quickly at Robert.

"She's like me, she doesn't," Robert said.

"It would happen just as I was thinking I could marry, with this promotion."

"You can't have your cake and eat it."

"We were both due for it anyway. I heard a latrine rumour a week ago."

"What about Mary, does she know?" Sarah asked.

"Well, it's been so sudden I've only had time to scribble a note. And you can't be too careful nowadays, so I told her to get in touch with you. After all, this is an operational move." He was torn between a wish to bemoan his fate and a wish to be quietly heroic.

During the drive to Amesbury Sarah remained cheerful, numbed by the wine and brandy. She drew up, as usual, short of the guardroom. Michael said good night, pressing her arm sympathetically as he kissed her cheek. Immediately her misery returned and with it resentment at his interference.

They watched in silence while he turned into the gates, but even then neither of them could think of anything to

say. They sat and held hands until Robert had finished his cigarette and flicked the butt out of the window. "Don't forget, darling, write to me here until I can send my new address. I must go now, it's after nine already. Good-bye, Sarah. I shall see you soon."

"Good-bye, Robert. Take care of yourself." Their kiss stretched on a long time as they clung to each other, half turned uncomfortably in their seats. It was a bitter kiss, passionless, a yearning for the past, a desperation for the future. He put on his cap and opened the car door, and she tried to remind him to write every day. But the words stuck in her throat. She wanted him to go, quickly, not to say another word or she would burst into tears and ruin everything. After he had raised his right hand and turned away she backed the car on to the grass verge. She waited until he had reached the gates and raised his hand once more. Then he disappeared and she began to drive to Salisbury. She could feel the pain in her throat increasing and before she had gone half a mile the road ahead began to blur and she pulled up, resting her head on the steering wheel, feeling the silent tears burn in her eyes. After a few minutes she was aware of lights coming towards her and a lorryload of men went by, slowing down as they approached the camp. They were singing, and as the sound receded she heard the end of a verse, "... down Mexico way ..." and the dying fall of song, the thought of the singing men and Robert, walking alone to his wooden hut and beginning the unimaginable packing, drove her misery too deep and dried her eyes.

Sarah returned to Sevenoaks. She began to receive cheerful letters from Robert, saying that he had nothing

much to tell her and that it was all quite different from what he had expected. From this she believed that he was still doing the same sort of work. But at the end of the first week in June Mary phoned to congratulate her on the news that Robert had shot down a plane.

"How did you hear, Mary?" She began to fumble at her cigarette-case.

"Michael, of course. Surely you know they're in the same squadron. Michael says he's whacked, they're flying all day."

"Who's whacked?"

"Sarah, what's the matter with you? Michael is. He just said Robert was fine and had shot down a Messerschmitt. Didn't you know?"

"I didn't, actually. I expect Robert will tell me in his next letter. Where are they?" At the moment she cared nothing for security.

"Well . . . I don't quite know. It's all a bit peculiar. But can't we meet soon?"

"Yes, come to London tomorrow."

"I can't possibly tomorrow or Wednesday. Make it Thursday. Where?"

"At my house. You've got the address: 37 Sloane Terrace. Would twelve o'clock be too early?"

"No, I don't think so." They talked for another half-minute and then rang off. Sarah sat on by the phone, first of all angry with Robert and then afraid. She looked at her watch and saw that the evening post was due in an hour's time.

But there was no letter. It was as though the telephone conversation had put an end to his letters; she had still heard nothing by the time she met Mary in London, and prior to this there had never been a gap of more than two days.

"But I haven't heard either, not since that last letter of Michael's. Please don't worry. I wish to Heaven I'd never mentioned it, but it didn't occur to me. . . ."

"I'm not worried. It's just that I'm worrying about not hearing."

That day she deliberately delayed her arrival at Seven-oaks until after the evening post, convinced that if she did so she would walk into the hall and see the familiar-shaped envelope on the tray. There were three letters. She knew at a glance that none was from Robert, but she picked them up and looked at them slowly, like a greedy gambler looking at his cards, almost expecting a fourth letter to appear magically. She dawdled by the tray, looking through the letters again. She dropped them and went into the lounge.

Mr. Valmont was reading an evening paper. She poured herself a drink.

"You mustn't worry about not hearing, Sarah. Everything's so confused I don't suppose more than a fraction of the letters are getting through. At the rate the Germans are going I should think most of his time is spent in moving, not fighting."

"I expect you're right, but you're wrong if you think you're going to cure me of hanging about the hall morning and evening."

"I'm not trying to cure you of anything," he answered quietly, holding out his empty glass. "I'm much too concerned about Robert to bother curing anyone but myself. You're convinced he's going to be killed and I'm convinced he's not. In spite of my concern I'm still convinced."

"The only thing you convince me of, Daddy, is that you're a rotten liar."

The days passed and she longed to return to Salisbury,

thinking that she would find in the men they had known an understanding that it was not in her father's power to give. But in the same way that she had been chained to the house in Chelsea at the start of the war, so now she was chained to Sevenoaks waiting for a letter. She knew that she could be phoned as soon as it arrived and her father could read it to her, but her longing to see and feel was almost as great as her longing to read.

By the time the evacuation of Dunkirk was finished and neither she nor Mary had heard again Sarah began to suffer from a deathly lethargy. She still came down to breakfast each morning and sat with her father, but after he had left for London she would go back to her room and lie on the bed. And when eventually she dressed and ate lunch she would go into the garden and sit in a deck-chair, letting the hours slip over her like water. To the house-keeper and the two servants still with them she seemed obsessed by her worry, but in fact for most of the time her mind was too numbed to register anxiety or pain. It rejected everything, his death or safety, the continuance of their love or its end, and having rejected everything remained a blank.

When the phone rang on the afternoon of the second of July she stood up and crossed the lawn. She had run too often in the last month to hurry. She did not recognise the voice.

"Can I speak to Mrs. Middleton, please?"

"Speaking."

"You don't know me, of course, but I'm a friend of your husband's. Hullo."

"Yes, I'm listening."

"He asked me to phone you when I got back. He's at a place well south and hopes to be in England three days from now, perhaps less. He's perfectly all right."

"That's wonderful . . . wonderful! Can't you tell me where he is? No, it doesn't matter, well south you said . . . he is all right? How many days at the most . . .?"

Sarah never knew how the conversation ended. After what seemed a long time she put down the receiver knowing no more than the man's first sentences of information. And as the receiver clicked she realised that she did not even know his name and had not enquired of Michael. Possibly she could never trace the man who had spoken to Robert.

Emerging from her coma she now suffered agonies of impatience and anxiety as her mind rioted over the disasters that could still happen. Her ignorance of the man's name illogically inflamed this condition. She tried in every way she knew to control herself, to prepare herself to accept his death, and to accept it without inflicting pain on her father. But although outwardly still capable of pretended calm, inwardly she had lost control of herself, even experiencing anguished hatred against Robert, the cause of her suffering. Sometimes she felt that her love could never recover from the shock that he had failed her; that somehow, anyhow, he should and could have written. She would be thinking in this manner even as she scoured local garages, begging shamelessly, paying any price asked, for black-market coupons so that she would have enough petrol to go anywhere in England to meet him.

On the fourth day she felt her lethargy creeping back, and then he phoned from Southampton and told her that he was leaving at once by train for Waterloo.

She stood a little apart from the throng of relations and sensation-seekers at the barrier, knowing that if she mingled with them someone would speak to her. She

was too exhausted to talk, her blood was heavy and full of sleep, the pit of her stomach a sick void. And yet she was transported, her mouth dry with this miracle that was about to take place. She saw nothing of the stream of tired and dirty men that poured off the train, waited until the focus of her eyes took in Robert, watched him draw nearer, pass the barrier. Then his arm was about her and they left the station, walking to where she had parked the car.

When they reached the house Robert went into the kitchen and spoke to Mrs. Batchly, quickly returning to the living-room. She was leaning back in the corner of the sofa. He went to the cupboard and opened a new bottle of whisky, pouring two large measures. Then he knelt on the floor beside her.

"God, I'm sorry, darling." He spoke in a whisper, shocked by her appearance, the indefinable transparency of suffering as though the skin was being dissolved from within. Her grey-green eyes were darker, the shadow of unformed lines lay on her forehead and about her mouth.

"It doesn't matter, Robert. I expect the letters got lost." She touched his hair with her hands.

"I wasn't talking about letters. Drink something. Why, when did you last hear?"

"Beginning of June."

"I must have written a dozen since then. It's because of you I'm sorry."

"Did you write?" She knew beyond the possibility of doubt that he had.

"Need you ask? I wrote pages, whenever possible. Some days it wasn't. You knew that I would write, I *said* that I would."

"Unless you were dead or some other ghastly thing happened. I know you wrote. In any case it doesn't

matter. It's just that I'm a little tired. Come and sit on the sofa. Bring the bottle and siphon."

"I hope you haven't been knocking it back," he said, smiling.

"No, I haven't, funnily enough. One or two with Daddy." 'It's two o'clock,' she thought. 'Soon Robert must phone his people, then Daddy; we must eat and go to Sevenoaks. But first I must sit here and rest, have another whisky.' She held out her empty glass and once more he gave her a large measure. Then she moved so that Robert could sit in the corner and she could rest against his chest. He lit a cigarette for her, making her as comfortable as he could, and waited.

She finished the second whisky quickly and put the tumbler on the floor. He would have given her a third if she had asked, but she dropped the half-finished cigarette into the glass and again rested her head on his chest, holding his hand lightly. He thought that she would begin to talk now, but the silence stretched on. He was puzzled and anxious at this untypical behaviour, and then he noticed that the hand holding his was inert and Sarah was asleep.

He had told Mrs. Batchly not to disturb them, and now he sat on for almost an hour, until he could hear her making impatient noises with the oven door and the hatch. He was certain Sarah would wake when he moved, but she might have been drugged. He put a cushion under her head and took off her shoes, covering her with a rug.

He ate lunch in the kitchen and tried to answer some of Mrs. Batchly's extraordinary questions. Then he went out to a call-box. He phoned his people first and then Mr. Valmont, assuring him that they both wanted to come to Sevenoaks, but would return to London tomorrow.

He came back to the house and sat quietly in the sitting-room. He watched her for a while and then he too fell asleep. When he awoke her eyes were open and she smiled at him. They stood up and kissed.

They were both thirsty and went to the kitchen to make tea; Sarah and Mrs. Batchly sat at the table while Robert leant against the draining-board. It was Mrs. Batchly who did most of the talking; she seemed to act as Sarah's medium, continuing to ask all the questions Sarah should have asked, about the chaotic journey to Bordeaux, what he had eaten, where he had slept, how he had managed for clean underwear and razor blades.

As they approached Sevenoaks Sarah's state of shock had almost passed, and she remembered to enquire about Edmee.

"I didn't see her. I managed to phone twice, but there was no reply."

"And Michael?"

"He was on the same boat as me, but a later train. He's done jolly well."

Sarah was surprised, but not very interested. Her one wish now was to get through the rest of the evening as quickly as possible and to sleep in Robert's arms. Only to sleep: his presence still seemed too mysterious, too unearthly, for physical love. She did not understand why this should be, and in her still tired mind was a fear that Robert would expect and want a show of passion. She was afraid that although her love was greater now than at any other time she would be unable to express it.

But her fears were groundless. As soon as they were in bed her long kiss, her tired gentleness, told Robert the state of her heart. And instead of disappointment he felt triumph.

(IV)

On the last night of Robert's leave Mr. Valmont gave a small dinner party at the Savoy to celebrate two events—the immediate award of the D.F.C. to Robert and the wedding three days earlier of Michael and Mary. There were other causes for celebration. Robert had been told he could expect promotion to squadron leader, and Michael thought that his own award of the D.F.C. would be gazetted in a few weeks.

During Robert's leave he and Sarah had, of course, spoken a great deal about his experiences in France. But this was mostly due to Sarah's interest and Robert's wish not to give the impression of a silent hero. Nor did he want to minimise dangers which he was certain would have to be faced again. If he was to be killed Sarah should be prepared for this, and not allowed to imagine that his escape from France was the finish of her personal war. He was afraid of dying, but he was not proud that his main fear was on account of Sarah's suffering. Believing as he did in an ordered universe (although the ordering was a mystery which he did not try to penetrate), death was not a personal tragedy. And he believed too that certain laws could demand the total sacrifice of an innocent victim. These beliefs might not have sustained him when death was close enough to overwhelm him with the reflexes of survival. But there was yet another force. Unknown to Robert (although interlocked with his beliefs), he was one of a diminishing band whose rootedness to what he loosely looked on as his country had not been slowly corrupted by the inextricable processes of the previous hundred years. And against his rootedness he had no power to rebel.

Although he was ignorant of this he sensed that for him there was nothing particularly meritorious in having shot down a plane, or what merit there was lay only in his acquired skill as a pilot. He realised too that his award was lucky, due more to the policy of the high command to sweeten the bitterness of defeat by a lavish sugaring of decorations through all ranks. He considered that Michael had truly earned *his* award because he knew that Michael had suffered from intense fear. But he did not speak of that to Sarah.

Michael spent much of his leave relating his experiences to anyone who might be interested, and almost everyone was. By the end of that time he had practically come to believe his own stories. All that was left to remind him of the truth were his dreams, and these were so confused that he managed to ignore them, although he could not ignore the fact that one night he wetted his hotel bed as he re-lived the moment of his first take-off in action. (On his return he had managed to get to the canteen and spill a cup of tea down his trousers before anyone noticed, and he resorted to the same sort of expedient with the chambermaid.)

In his dreams it was Robert who played the central role, or rather all the roles, his friend and enemy, the slayer and the slain. Sometimes he would dream again of the cloak of comfort in which Robert enveloped him during his first nightmare days of fear, fear pinpointed at the moment of death, that horror against which he had no armour. All other cloaks were mere transparencies through which he could still see the unspeakable landscape of his imagination. Then his dream would change; he would know again the paralysis of the take-off, the thick iciness as the earth tilted and receded, the despair of his

defencelessness. The moment of extreme danger: the searing shock as his brain divided scarletly: the cornered rage for destruction of the enemy, Robert, himself, everything: the slow emergence from his catalepsy: the physical weakness of relief that he was assured of a few more hours of life.

It was of this he dreamt far more frequently than of the exploit for which he expected the D.F.C., for these things had really happened. But as he began to believe his own twist of lies and truth the story came back in sleep. The night, the boom of exploding petrol, the desperate need for haste, the knowledge that Robert and the main party were already two hours' journey to the south, the thought that at any moment the helmeted emblems of death would appear in front of him, motionless in the running fiery shadows . . .

. . . On his motor-cycle, guiding the two three-tonners loaded with salvaged stores, weaving in and out of the chaos of refugee traffic, stopping, waiting, his head swimming with an exhaustion more dreamlike than his present dream. The fork in the road and his sudden decision to leave the lorries, let them make their own way to the known rendezvous while he attempted a detour.

He was lost. The night was warm and he slept by the edge of a wood. At first light he awoke. It was not a wood, only a strip of trees. Through the trees was a long field from which hay had already been carted and in it was a plane with a damaged undercarriage, a figure sprawling by the side. Sometimes Robert; sometimes Robert in German uniform. The top of the head was smashed in: a few yards away an iron bar. The strap of a camera just showed beneath the body and he pulled it out. He tried to roll the body over and photograph Robert's face, but something stopped him. He took a

grenade from his pouch, gingerly drew the pin and either crammed it in the open mouth or dropped it in the cockpit . . . he could not run away but the explosion never hurt him.

For some reason his dream always finished there. The rest was a prosaic story of photographing the body and the burning plane and eventually finding his way to the rendezvous.

Conditions were so chaotic that all stories seemed credible, and Michael's was backed by photographs. Men were judged on what they did, not why they did it, and that he should elect to creep up on a German pilot and brain him rather than toss a grenade from a safe distance was in keeping with his observed behaviour flying. Only Robert was somewhat suspicious. He had realised the extent of Michael's fear during their first days in France, and it had been his protective company which had prevented his condition being recognised. How the change had come about Robert did not know, and was at once too relieved and too occupied to care.

When Michael arrived back from France he was in a mood of triumphant relief, determined to extract the last ounce of pleasure from his role of the returning hero. He felt that at last he had proved himself, that the approbation of others was now his by right. He wanted to cover himself with causes for congratulation and when Mary, overjoyed by his safe return, suggested that now they should marry he agreed with only slight misgivings.

From the very beginning marriage was a disappointment to both. Mary's inexperience and belief in her own plainness required the stimulus of traditional ceremony, not the bleakness of a registry office. She also needed far more loving gentleness on their first night than Michael was capable of offering. From his one previous experience

he expected Mary to combine a fresher passion with the mental nonchalance of a whore. He hurt her, not only physically, and disliked the outward showings of both.

(V)

Over Manston on the 30th of August, at twelve thousand feet, Robert's Hurricane was hit and burst into flames. A splinter grazed the side of his head and he did not recover consciousness until the plane, twisting and turning, had reached five thousand. His left sleeve was soaked with blood and he could not move his arm. He jumped at one thousand and his parachute opened, as an eye-witness said, at tree-top level. He broke a leg in landing. By then he had shot down four planes and whilst in hospital was awarded a bar to his D.F.C.

At that date Michael's score was two certain and two probable. For the next three days he felt his endurance drain swiftly away, and on the fourth day took off in a state of sweating terror. At the moment of danger he experienced a release so intense that it bordered on insanity. Within a few minutes he had shot down a bomber and then, in what amounted to a suicidal pressing home of an attack, his wing-tip sheared off the tail of an enemy fighter which crashed into the sea off Broadstairs.

When he came in to land he did not put his wheels down and ignored (whether deliberately or not he could never decide) the red flares fired across his landing. Nothing else went wrong. The propeller broke off cleanly and the plane slewed round and stopped by the edge of the runway.

He struggled out. The ambulance and fire truck were racing towards him and as he stepped forward a

terrible pain gripped his chest. He pitched forward on the tarmac.

(VI)

Michael and Robert saw very little of each other for the next two years. They were sent to different hospitals and at the end of six weeks Michael was discharged and told he would not fly operationally any more. He divided his sick leave between London and Gloucester, and was then posted as assistant adjutant to a group of squadrons near Chelmsford. After he had been there three months the adjutant left and Michael, who had proved himself an unusually able administrator, was promoted squadron leader and took over the appointment.

He was moved once to an aerodrome at Norwich, but he was scarcely aware of the change. For him the office and the mess, the barracks and the hangars and the local pubs, became his spiritual home, the sound of aeroplanes celestial music. Now that the danger was so successfully over and sealed with a bar to his D.F.C. he began to romanticise flying in his mind, finding a vicarious thrill in listening to the experiences of the pilots whom, as adjutant, he came to regard as 'his'. He developed a paternal attitude towards them; the handlebar moustache which he twisted so lovingly was not only treasured as a hallmark of the RAF, it also added years to his age. But this paternalism, as is so often the case, was not extended to those regarded as 'failures'. The successful ones found him charming and sympathetic and their moments of temporary fear, of depression, of longing to see their wives or sweethearts, were passed on to Michael either in his office or, more usually, across some bar. His comfort could be summed up by his frequent expression, "You

don't have to tell *me*, laddie, I know just how you feel." He enjoyed being as generous as possible with leave, or interceding with the commanding officer for some officer's bad behaviour; he also enjoyed showing malevolence to the failures.

His ties with Robert were almost severed, not only by wartime circumstances but also because both he and the rest of his little world regarded him as a success. He no longer needed the buttress of Robert's friendship; he was temporarily financially secure, so Sarah's wealth lost much of its attraction. But Robert had been a necessity too long, and for the one brief period in France too intensely. Michael did not want to cut him out of his life completely. There was a hard core of envy, now and for ever. So occasionally he would write, and to see their handwriting would recreate confused emotions of fear and resentment and dependence. But he did not see them. He took less than his share of leave, and only did that when he felt it necessary to show some commanding officer how much the smooth administration depended on his presence. Then he would go to London and Mary would join him. But he was always glad when the leave was over; Mary would go back to her work of receptionist and secretary to her father, and Michael would go home.

It would not be true to say that Robert never thought of Michael except when reminded by letter, but his thoughts about him were so uncomplicated that they passed unnoticed. Robert would have been amused but somewhat insulted if he had been told that much of his mind was extremely masculine (he would have imagined some hearty extrovert, insensitive to anything but his own ego: he knew that this was often a façade to some

deep inadequacy, was sometimes sorry for them yet still disliked them). But his masculinity had been fed by the war and now all his interest was divided between his work and Sarah. Michael was a friend of his, difficult to understand, not altogether likeable, even, in an obscure way, dangerous. But time had produced its usual warm patina and he would stay his friend until he did something which would forfeit it irretrievably.

A nerve in Robert's arm had been damaged and he was in hospital for three months. After his sick leave he was posted to Air Headquarters in London, working in the branch concerned with the final plans for the introduction of the Mosquito bomber. He was sent to Northern Ireland to train with one of the first squadrons and then given command of an operational squadron in Hampshire. Six months later he was promoted wing commander in charge of the squadrons based on the aerodrome.

He stayed there until September 1942. By then he had flown a hundred and fifty operational sorties since the beginning of the war. He was awarded the D.S.O. and posted to the Intelligence Branch at Eastern Air Command in preparation for further advancement. By the end of December he was promoted group captain. He was warned to stand by for overseas service and told that he would be in charge of aerial reconnaissance based on North Africa and covering Sicily and Italy, for which Mosquitoes were being used. One of his last duties with Eastern Air Command took him to the aerodrome where Michael was adjutant.

(VII)

Although for these two years work occupied a much greater proportion of his time than Sarah, yet she was

the mainspring of his days. He had not understood (to have done so without experience was impossible) that the continued act of love does not necessarily start a slow decay, and if habit produces satiation it can also intensify pleasure. Their most private intimacies, repeated and repeated, took on the semblance of 'Open Sesames'. On the physical plane he also reaped the benefit of his earlier continence. Because he had never slept with another woman, and because Sarah herself was so beautiful and easy to love, she had become his epitome; there was no yardstick by which she could be measured.

Robert's continence of itself would not have been sufficient to preserve intact this facet of his love. He knew that it is essentially ephemeral, whether counted in terms of months or years. But he did not allow this knowledge to produce a resignation to its death. For him it was too precious on every count to be squandered, and those few weeks after his first meeting with Sarah had warned him that no one was more likely than she to squander it recklessly. After his discharge from hospital he had begun to do what most people under similar circumstances would have found impossible—force on himself some degree of self-control. And, even more difficult, he had done this without Sarah suspecting what was happening or the tremendous effort, at one level, it was necessary for him to make.

And on a plane other than physical the repeated act of love was also having its effect. Dripping water does not always wear away stone, sometimes it builds stalagmites. And each gesture of love, each act, left with Robert a filmy deposit of tenderness. He was aware of most of Sarah's faults and the emphasis she unknowingly put on her sensory existence; he knew that apart from her beauty she was no more remarkable than most other human beings.

And yet to him she was growing, all the time, more real and more unique than any other person in the world.

But though he understood many things about Sarah and himself he did not understand the extent of her necessity for him.

For Sarah had learnt a little of self-reliance, and though she did rely on Robert to a degree which sometimes frightened her she tried her best to hide it, fearing that it would be a burden to him. Ever since the start of the war she had unconsciously relegated to second place her own private life both as a woman and an individual, and this suppression had helped to blind her to the changes which were taking place all the time in her outlook and character. Both she and Robert had changed, and most of the changes stemmed from their love, which was expanding even though its moods and intensity might fluctuate. But in Sarah's case suffering also caused these changes, and of the two it was she who suffered most. Robert possessed a power of acceptance and a cloudy knowledge of reality, whereas she only possessed him. She did not know this in the form of knowledge, for true self-knowledge (in spite of almost everyone's secret belief in its possession) involves a mystery hardly to be solved in human terms. But though she did not know it she increasingly lived it. Their first separation, the death of Henry, Robert's posting to France, the terrible month of June and then the climax of August, each in their differing ways had created voids which she could only fill with Robert; a void of which she was first aware when first she fell in love. In the past his physical presence had been sufficient; it was on the day of his return from France that she began to live the knowledge that this was no longer enough, that what this void must have was the continual reassurance that she was loved entirely.

But since his time in hospital Sarah had been happy. As long as he was connected with operational flying she suffered, but familiarity taught her endurance. And all the time she was supported by his love, a love which it was impossible to doubt for it permeated everything he did. In the very moment of reaching out for proof, proof would be in her hand.

Ever since his discharge from hospital Sarah had managed, with only short breaks of a few weeks, to be with him. Even without her wealth her need was so imperative that she would have found means to accomplish this, but, as it was, all she had to do was use her cheque-book ruthlessly. Furnished houses or flats, servants, unrationed food and unlimited drink, all were produced as a means to the end . . . the devoting of her spare time to Robert and the provision, for him, of all possible comfort.

Once they were settled in a house in Hampshire the pattern of their time at Salisbury re-established itself. People were inevitably attracted to them, and though Robert now began to insist on a certain amount of privacy, they were almost at the stage of keeping open house. He accepted her wealth in the same way as she would have accepted his, something of little importance apart from its great convenience, but unlike her he did have secret qualms about the extent of his own happiness and good fortune. To still these qualms he was over-generous with what he most valued, his time with Sarah. And all the officers who came, single or married, found in their house what they themselves were deprived of or had never known. There was luxury and generosity, freedom and understanding, and everyone, women as well as men,

could relax in the strangely warming knowledge of a happy marriage. In spite of her beauty and her style of living only the meanest women resented Sarah, and not even these (however they might lay tongue to their husbands) could be genuinely jealous of her.

But the majority of people who came were single men, and it was with these that Sarah felt most at home. She was surprised to find that they were more sympathetic than the married men, who, whether they were in or out of love with their wives, usually wanted to discuss them after a few drinks. It was the single men who would drop in casually whenever Robert was engaged on operations, and though they also spoke of their private affairs she often felt that it was only done to detach her mind from Robert.

During this period she came to understand the fantastic variants of people and their absorption with love in all its forms. It was as though at that time the combination of war, a sympathetic listener and a certain amount of alcohol destroyed the usual barriers to communication between human beings, and things were told to her as facts which would have defied the imagination to invent. Slowly but surely an impression grew in her mind that it was useless to ask anyone why they behaved in a certain way because no one knew; there was a compulsion to do an act to achieve an end, and that end was almost invariably good, or at least seemed good to the doer.

She found it increasingly difficult to condemn anyone's action, not even the boy who told her that although he was deeply in love with his fiancée and had no reason whatever to be jealous, yet he regularly and unwillingly slept with other women. He told her (and it was the truth) that he did this against the possibility of his ever

finding out some future infidelity of hers, and that then he would remember his own offences and it would be easier to forgive her. She sensed that his reasoning was stupid and wrong (particularly as she regarded love as 'sacred', though not marriage) but that was not the point. He believed that he was right, and to her that belief in this particular case somehow made it right. Very hazily her mind reached out towards the direction of hating the sin and loving the sinner. But at once she was confused by the thought that what she regarded as a big sin might not be a sin at all for someone else, and that therefore all sin was entirely an individual thing. She could see that this argument was inadmissible in the case of sins against society and that offenders must be punished. But this line of reasoning was a *cul-de-sac* too, because Sarah unconsciously differentiated between crime and sin. Picking a stranger's pocket would be a crime, stealing from a friend a sin. She had little knowledge of either—crime was an abstraction that happened to other people, sin was almost always a personal act directed against another person, such things as adultery (a sin against Robert) or the telling of malicious lies. She did not think she could sin against herself. Thus no act of sex between two human beings could be a sin provided a third person was not hurt, and even then it might not be classed as a sin. A man who ill-treated his wife could not claim that she had sinned if she slept with someone else.

Sarah very seldom used the word sin. It was too close to such words as 'God' or 'Christ', which could not be used without acute embarrassment except in a *tête-à-tête* or when three or four people, late at night, were quite unusually drunk. Instead of speaking of sin she spoke of doing wrong, and always the wrong was to some other individual, never to herself. And in all this she faithfully

reflected the attitude of the people with whom she came in contact.

When the last guest had left after one such discussion (during which Robert had spoken little) and Sarah was tidying the lounge she asked if he was tired.

"Not particularly."

"You were very silent tonight."

"I was very bored."

"You don't believe in God, do you?"

"Not the God they were talking about, some white-bearded old bore way up in the clouds, entirely concerned with black and white. That's too childish."

"But you do believe in something?"

"Yes, I do. But that sort of half-drunk maundering is worse than useless. It's dangerous. It makes people believe that they *do* believe. It makes them think they're profound and clever when in reality they haven't the faintest conception. They feel something and when they've swilled enough gin out it comes, as messy as having a good vomit but not so useful."

He would have gone on but Sarah, whose attention was half-given to her work and who had been somewhat bored herself, picked up a tray of dirty glasses and took them to the scullery.

But such discussions were far outnumbered by the times when people came merely to enjoy an evening of drink and gossip about the day-to-day events which linked them together. It was a period when most people, Sarah and Robert included, tended to drink more than usual, provided it was available. But Sarah seldom saw Robert within measurable distance of drunkenness as she understood the word, and her only way of judging if he had had more than usual was by her knowledge that when they went to bed he wanted to make love but would not.

Instead he would turn his back and she would put her arms around him. He would sleep restlessly, getting up once or twice to go to the lavatory or clean his teeth. And she, half asleep, would wait impatiently for his return, for the chill of his naked back to change once more to warmth within her arms. Nor would he make love in the morning; he would drink his tea quickly and then move his body a little down the bed, resting his head on her breast as he leant against her, showing love by grumbling as she moved to drink her own much-needed tea.

In a way Sarah liked these nights, made long by his restlessness. The day that followed always had a special flavour, a softness that was half fatigue, half foreknowledge of the night to come. She would think constantly of Robert as she went about her work. This irritated her for it made the day seem long, but though irritated she was also amused by herself, for it was only on these days that she could do what she most detested, go through his shirts and underwear to sew on buttons.

Normally her days passed quickly, for Sarah now found great pleasure in the science of running a house without apparent effort. She also found that if money produces comfort it produces work as well, and the scale of her entertaining more than offset such servants as were available. During the day she led the typically disjointed and harassed life of a woman, worrying over her store-cupboard, the non-arrival of last fortnight's laundry (in spite of the bottle of gin for the manager), the Rhode Island Reds that seemed more voracious than tigers. Then, shortly before Robert came home, she would make an unconscious effort to brush these thick feminine cobwebs from her mind and adjust herself to Robert's outlook.

Of course she could never completely succeed, but she came close to doing so. Everything conspired to help her,

her early independence and wealth and, above all, her beauty, which had never made it necessary for her to stress her femininity. And constantly surrounded by men she did gradually acquire masculine traits, a freedom of speech and behaviour which though not necessarily coarse was unfeminine.

Robert did not altogether approve of the ease with which Sarah increasingly assumed this role. He was afraid that she might also acquire a taste for masculine freedom which after the war would express itself in unwillingness for children, and more and more Robert wanted a child. But during his tours of operations he did not speak of this. It was better to let her acquire a veneer of hardness, a way of thinking that might help her to stand the possible impact of his death.

But when he was posted to the Intelligence Branch he knew that this implied future employment which he regarded as hardly more dangerous than the normal hazards of bombs or London traffic. His work enabled them to live again in Chelsea, and in the sitting-room on the first evening of their return he ran his finger along her eyebrow and the line of scar. She smiled, knowing this to be the prelude to some request.

"Yes, darling?"

"Nothing much," he answered, smiling back. "Actually it is much, I was thinking we might risk a family now. I should say there's a pretty good chance of being practically chair-borne for the rest of the war."

She looked at him for a long moment, suddenly and intensely moved by the thought of carrying his child, of her vicarious suffering. She longed passionately, knew with certainty, that her first child would be a male in Robert's image. "Yes," she said. She kissed his mouth, pressing her hand against the back of his head, and then

took out her handkerchief and wiped the lipstick lovingly from his lips.

"I'll go to Murlieux tomorrow. Thank God he doesn't look human. I can't imagine anything more humiliating than squirming about in front of a good-looking doctor." She laughed, "You've made me old-fashioned." They kissed again.

Tacitly they refrained for a few nights. But the time came; and as their mutual crisis approached and they breathed, as of habit, each other's name before their open mouths stifled each other's cry, Sarah was naming her child. And for the rest of that night she slept badly, too aware of Robert.

This exalted mood did not last long, for she was busy adapting herself once more to London. She missed their old friends, but by now she was used to this destructive facet of war. She was not reminded of her moment of certainty until her second period. Made faintly uneasy she phoned her doctor, who told her not to worry, that possibly she needed time for readjustment. November passed and most of December. She was still not pregnant. Sarah was not a patient person, and she made up her mind to ask for a thorough examination.

But before she could do this Robert told her of his new appointment, and the prospect of his immediate posting to North Africa drove everything else from her mind.

(VIII)

During discussions at Eastern Command it had been suggested to Robert that if he wished to put forward the name of some officer to run the administration of his new appointment he could do so. He first thought of his old

adjutant in Hampshire and then remembered Michael. Once again it occurred to him that Sarah would prefer to feel he was going abroad with someone they had known since their first meeting. He asked for Michael's record as an administrator to be checked, and was surprised to find it so excellent. He arranged to visit his acrodrome and speak to him personally.

He expected Michael would be eager for a change after two years, and with promotion as an added inducement.

"I'm not worried about promotion," Michael answered quickly and with arrogance. "I could have had that easily enough. I've been happy here and doing a bloody good job into the bargain. *You* know that, don't tell me you haven't had my dossier looked up at H.Q."

"Of course. You don't imagine I'd do it on a chum-to-chum basis. Think it over and send me a signal in the morning; if you don't want it I've got someone else lined up. But I hope you'll come."

And the next morning Michael wired his acceptance. Seeing Robert again, hearing his voice, had re-created his old feelings of insecurity, of dependence and jealousy. As chief administrative officer he knew from experience that unless Robert supervised every detail he could quickly become indispensable. At that point something in Michael's mind blocked the thought that this was an opportunity to pay off old scores. Because he did not want to know what these old scores were, nor why there was a secret fascination in the thought of Robert ruined and disgraced (but not, of course, through Michael). By the time he told his commanding officer that he felt forced to accept on account of their long friendship and the opportunity for promotion he believed it himself.

He was offered a fortnight's leave, but unable to resist

any chance of impressing authority he spent the first week helping the new adjutant to take over. It was no hardship, a week with Mary in London was quite sufficient.

By now days at a time would pass without thought of his wife, and when he did it would often be with a similar sensation to his remembrance of Newcastle, something in the remote past which he wished to forget. But it was impossible to forget Mary so completely; there were her weekly letters and (an even sharper reminder) his monthly pay slip showing the allotment he made her. He now looked on this marriage as his only mistake of the war.

Mary had nearly arrived at a similar conclusion. Her love for Michael had slowly been strangled by his indifference. But though she blamed his work she also made it the excuse, believing that once the war was over perhaps matters would improve. She did not know how it had come about, but from his infrequent letters she knew with certainty that he no longer loved her. There was feeling in his letters but it was all directed inwards; the strain *he* experienced living with men who so often died, the pleasure *he* felt that his own efficiency, his own sympathetic outlook, must be of some help to them. For her there was nothing, only dead endearments at start and finish.

She resolved to find out what Michael felt about their marriage during their week in London, but immediately they met she was chilled, almost frightened, by his coldness. She was reluctant to speak of their relationship, afraid that he would tell her at once that he no longer loved her. All the first day her foreboding increased, only to vanish in the evening when they went to Robert and Sarah for drinks and dinner. Once they were all together he seemed to become aware of her existence, spoke and behaved affectionately. Thankfully she postponed her

questions, and went on postponing them until the last night.

Early that evening they all met at a club in Soho which was mostly used by RAF officers. Mary was embarrassed by the persistence with which Michael tried to persuade Robert to stay on, but Robert was equally insistent on spending his own last evening alone with Sarah. As soon as they had left, Michael sulked, but she said nothing, waiting until drink made him wish to talk, and then listened patiently while he reminisced about his time at Norwich.

When they eventually returned to their hotel and were undressing Mary still hesitated. Ever since Robert and Sarah had left, a shutter seemed to have fallen between them and he had talked incessantly about himself. It was he who gave her an opening by suddenly cutting short some story. He turned to her.

"Robert doesn't seem to have changed very much. Anyone would think he was still on his honeymoon, pushing off like that."

"Well, why shouldn't they still be in love? It's their last night, *I* should have thought it peculiar if he hadn't."

"After all this time? It's not as though they've ever been separated. Sarah's followed him round like a bitch on heat. It's indecent the way they carry on."

"Don't talk nonsense, Michael. I've never seen two people less demonstrative in public, and I've never heard Robert discuss Sarah sentimentally. I don't suppose you have either, he's not the type."

"You don't have to neck in public to make an exhibition of yourself. Those two just exude sex all the time, and personally I find it rather repulsive. If they were really in love she'd be in bed by now."

Mary checked the obvious retort. He was working

himself into a strange rage, and though she had heard him criticise them before he had never done so with such bitterness. "I think you're wrong," she said quietly, "in fact I know you're wrong. Sarah told me the other evening that since Robert went to Eastern Command they've intended having a child. She might be already pregnant for all I know." She was just about to speak of their own intentions when Michael broke in:

"Good God Almighty! Do women tell each other everything? How many times a week does Robert poke her?"

"Oh, shut up, Michael. Why are you being so foul? I thought they were meant to be our best friends? It's of rather more concern to me what we intend doing, but the question of our having children doesn't seem to interest you in the slightest."

"You're dead right, it doesn't until the war's over. And I must say you don't seem particularly interested either, waiting for the last night of my leave before you mention it. But I'm not very surprised."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all." He lit a cigarette and she waited, but when he spoke again the tone of his voice was quite changed. "Don't let's quarrel tonight. You know I'm awfully fond of both of them." He came closer and put his hands on her shoulders, kissing her forehead. "But Sarah sort of worries me in a way. Do you think she's ever had a lover?"

She twisted away, inexplicably hurt. "You've got a mind like a sewer! It would take someone like you even to think it. They both happen to be too much in love, but you wouldn't know about that!"

"Wouldn't I? That's all you know! But Robert's always been your little blue-eyed hero. I think you fancy having Robert on top of you, eh Mary? Have those bloody

great shoulders pinning you down and him grinding away in your guts. It would be a case of dig deep, sailor, I'm a long-bodied woman; Mary? Wouldn't it? If you want a brat, get Robert to do you, I bet he shoots a pretty roc. If he got Sarah to pay I wouldn't mind fathering his bastard!" His voice was shaking with an emotion which she took to be rage.

She turned and hit him across the face as hard as she could, convinced that he would strike her in return. But he did nothing, and they stood in silent hatred. Then she smiled and it was only her dying anger that prevented her smile from being warm and friendly, for she was contented to be free.

(IX)

Neither Robert nor Sarah slept very much on their last night in Chelsea, but this was not caused by either passion or fear. Their minds were strange with the sadness of the parting, for its indeterminate length stretched over their lives. They slept in each other's arms in a way that was not their usual fashion, and Sarah was glad that it was uncomfortable. Sleep would waver through her mind like light through water, and she would force herself awake, moving her hand cautiously to cover his bare shoulder with the sheet, to brush back her hair from his face, to rest her hand on the smooth harshness of his thigh. And, held in the same trancelike wakefulness, Robert would respond, touch her forehead with his lips, press his naked body gently against hers, full of a sad yearning that he could not check. When the night was almost past, sleep came to both of them and their sleep was the same, a warm peace and a forgetting. But within two hours they remembered and they awoke each other.

"What's the time, Robert?" she whispered. He turned away from her, reaching for the bed-lamp, and she was acutely conscious of the stretched muscles of his back moving beneath her hand.

"A few minutes to six." He did not want to sleep again, but to lie with her and watch her face. "Shall I leave the light on, darling?"

"Yes, but put it on the floor so it's not so bright." Usually their first action on awakening was for Sarah to comb her hair and Robert to brush his teeth quickly at the wash-basin, but now their minds were wholly occupied with the timeless present, these last two hours which in advance seemed shorter than a sigh. He turned back to her and they lay on their pillows looking at each other; with complete irrelevance Sarah remembered Le Bourget, heard again the rustle of his lowered newspaper. She took her hand away from his and touched his forehead.

"I never noticed these lines," she whispered, "they don't join all the way across."

"I feel old this morning, darling, not sleeping and all." He smiled faintly with his eyes. "Have you noticed your own?"

"Yes, but only just, when I haven't got powder on. I'm nearly twenty-seven."

"My *old* woman." Their smiling lips touched gently. "Do you mind about getting old?"

"I don't think about it very much. It doesn't seem to matter awfully as long as . . ."

"As what?"

"I'm not going to say it. You know I hate saying that sort of thing unless you absolutely force me to." Her voice dropped. "You know I love you."

"Yes, I know."

"I used to like saying it, once. Do you remember what a swine you were when we got engaged? You spoke to me as though I was a cross between a schoolgirl and a tart. You said maybe I'd never be in love with you, not properly. But I can only remember vaguely now what it was you were really being bitter about."

"You started it by being naughty. But really I suppose it was because you were so dependent on me. If I had suddenly vanished into thin air you'd have gone crazy."

"Well, I would now. . . . That's why I want you to be careful, while you're away."

"But you mustn't be like that." His voice rose a little above the whisper of their closeness. "And you aren't, I know, not in the same way as you were. Being dependent on other people's existence is sort of cowardly as well as stupid."

"Why? If it's in my nature? I can see it's risky, but it's *my* risk. If you fell down the stairs and broke your neck *you* wouldn't have to worry."

He was silent for a moment, experiencing the old ache of inadequacy between his inner feelings and outward expression. It was an ache that was always intensified whenever he tried to speak of such things to Sarah, as though his love lay like an impediment on his tongue, was stretched like a surgeon's mask across his mouth. And all the words that filtered through seemed strained of meaning and significance, weightless compared to the weight of his emotion, even the infrequent words of love held no more than the ghost of a suggestion of a meaning. But now that he was going away, now that death had (for everyone) become a commonplace, he tried once more to express his thoughts.

"Because dependence on other people, even the best dependency, can only be partially good . . . most people

you're likely to meet are only partially good. I feel that ultimate goodness in a person acts as a sort of invisible cloak. I read a book once where the man kept using the expression 'dying to one's Self' and the necessity of 'destroying one's own ego'. I think that was what Christ meant when he spoke about 'he who would lose his life shall find it. . . .' It sounds nonsense, but I don't think anyone could accuse Christ of talking nonsense." Already he was beginning to lose the thread of his argument as he watched Sarah's face, was aware of time passing, of the long journey ahead, of human loneliness that was with him now. "Oh darling! I don't know what to say. There's nothing I can say or teach you, except all the corny stuff that's been said and said and said until no one bothers to listen any more. Some people think of these things and others don't, and those who think spend half their lives forgetting. And everybody's unique and thinks differently, even if they don't think at all." He was silent, knowing that it was impossible for her to understand the paradoxes that so confused his mind. At the same moment she moved into his arms, and loneliness came back.

"Sarah, there's just one other thing I want to say. While we're apart we're both going to be dreadfully lonely. We shall pay for all this happiness. I don't mean that happiness invariably has to be paid for, that would turn living into an abomination. But so often it turns out like that, and when it does I've an idea that the suffering is just as important as the happiness. It must be accepted, yet at the same time it must be escaped. The danger lies in which escape you choose. I've found out that it's always the most impossible-seeming cures that do the most good. When you're lonely, heap it up on a plate and cram it down, and if it seems to stick in your guts then

purge yourself with silence. Every time you run to someone for comfort you'll have to run a little quicker next time. And people hate being comforters, except just day-to-day belly-aches. Most people shun suffering in others as though it was infectious. I hope you never have to find out the hard way."

He wanted to go on talking, to warn her that those who need comfort are at their most vulnerable, feverishly eager to accept at its face value the first seeming palliative that is offered. But he himself was now in need of comfort, could feel this need stir in his blood and moisten his mouth, could feel the tide of his body rise to prohibit further thought. And there was a part of him that wanted to say "No. This is a betrayal." And yet another voice, just as clear, said "Yes. To do otherwise would be a crime."

As Sarah moved beneath him, her eyes closed, kissing his mouth briefly as she raised her shoulders for his arms to be put around her, Robert experienced a moment of intense humility, of worthless nothingness, and an indescribable necessity for some force to carry the weight of this nothingness. It was gone; and so was his loneliness and fear. Only he and Sarah were left, and the minutes that dropped like quicksilver from the travelling-clock.

(X)

While Robert was away Sarah intended to live at Sevenoaks and undertake some form of war work. But first she waited to see whether she had become pregnant, and soon she knew that she was not.

It was now late in January, and she decided to visit Murlieux for an examination. She phoned, but he was away and unable to see her for three weeks. Ten days after the examination she received his report. There was

an obstruction in the Fallopian tubes which would require her admission to a nursing home. This could not be arranged before the beginning of April. By the third week in April Sarah learnt that his diagnosis was correct and that insufflation had failed. It was impossible for her to have children.

Sarah had not told Robert of her intention to be examined, and her letters from the nursing home were picked up by her father and posted in Sevenoaks. She knew there was always the possibility that she might need some minor manipulation; she herself had no anxiety about it (regarding its success as a foregone conclusion) but she did not want to worry Robert.

For a week Sarah was not only extremely depressed by the news but also very anxious as to its effect on Robert. She felt unclean, as though she was suffering from some infectious and shameful disease, and the very thought of sex was repulsive. But this extreme view passed and its place was taken by a sense of failure, chiefly that she had failed Robert, but also that it was a personal failure. She began to wonder whether Robert would have fallen in love with her if he had had pre-knowledge of her sterility. But by the end of the first week in May she was more calm. She was certain of his love, certain that he would accept this injustice to her in the same way as she would accept a much greater injustice to him, blindness or some terrible mutilation. On the 6th of May she sat down and wrote him a long letter, telling him exactly what had happened.

(XI)

On the same day Robert was ordered to report immediately to London. There was a top-level conference con-

cerning the invasion of Sicily and at the last minute someone, thinking that the officer in charge of aerial reconnaissance might be required to speak in person, ordered his unnecessary presence. A converted Liberator was sent from England and his instructions were to fly to Rabat and join it there. Shortly before take-off the weather reports from the Atlantic were extremely bad. Robert was carrying no secret documents and his orders had been so imperative that it was decided to change the route and fly via the Mediterranean coast of Spain, crossing France after the Spanish border.

The change of plan was signalled to London and the plane took off at noon.

Because of Robert's partial knowledge of future operations the flight had been marked as carrying a V.I.P. It was scheduled to land at Heathrow and when it was three hours overdue the most intensive search was started by RAF Intelligence. Resistance groups in France covering the plane's route were contacted and one by one the reports came back that no Liberator had either been shot down or had crashed. Air H.Q. at Gibraltar contacted a patrolling submarine seventy-five miles off the coast of Spain between Valencia and Barcelona, and this submarine had picked up a plane on its radar at the time the Liberator should have passed. Enquiries were then concentrated on the Barcelona area and it was learnt that a most severe storm had passed out to sea at about this time. The submarine was ordered to search the area, and reconnaissance was laid on from Gibraltar. No trace of wreckage was found.

At the end of three days, when the last negative reports were received from the Resistance, it was presumed that the plane had attempted to go through the storm and had broken up in mid-air. In the hope that they might

have been flying nearer the coast, had managed to bale out and been picked up by some vessel, they were posted as missing. But the British consuls in Barcelona and Valencia had no information regarding such a rescue, nor had the Embassy at Madrid heard of a plane making a forced landing in Spain.

BOOK THREE

(I)

ON the 12th of May Sarah was in the kitchen helping Mrs. Logan to wash up after breakfast. The last maid had left to join the Land Army, and even with the help of a daily woman Sarah and Mrs. Logan found their hands full.

This morning Sarah was happy. She had received a long letter from Robert dated the 5th of May, so loving that he might have known her own troubled letter was shortly to be received and in advance was extending comfort. She wanted to answer at once, but that was a delight to be kept until the early evening. She heard the phone ring in the lounge and dried her hands on a dish-cloth as she walked through the hall.

"It's Mrs. Batchly speaking, ma'am. How are you?" She always spoke with laborious refinement on the telephone and Sarah smiled as she said that she was very well.

"There's a telegram just arrived. Shall I open it?"

"Yes, please." She heard the receiver bump in Chelsea, the scratch of unfolding paper: sparrows chirruped on the lawn outside. It couldn't be Robert. People ought not to send telegrams in wartime. Perhaps Robert was coming to London.

Mrs. Batchly began to read.

"Oh ma'am! What a dreadful thing I've done! Oh I am sorry!"

"It's not your fault. He's only missing. I'll come to London straight away. Don't worry, Mrs. B. I'll hang up now."

She lit a cigarette and walked to the french windows. She opened them and leant against the jamb. It really is a lovely day, she thought, too early in May for the garden to look untidy. I shall have plenty to do while I wait, weeding, digging, snipping off dead tulips and then the roses. I'll go to London now and phone Maurice, he'll find out for me. If he's dead he's dead, there's nothing I can do. I'm all right for petrol. I might go to a film.

She went back to the kitchen. "I'm afraid I've got bad news, Ivy. Mr. Robert is missing." Why do I sound like one of the nurses at that home? "I'm going to London but I shall be back for supper, perhaps I shall drive back with Daddy."

"Miss Sarah!" She had turned from the sink and her faded blue eyes seemed to be pulled wide open by the soft, creased skin that sagged past the corners of her mouth and fell to a dewlap. The speed with which her eyes filled with tears surprised Sarah, and she put her arm round her shoulder.

"Don't upset yourself, Ivy. He's only missing." This has happened to me before, she thought incredulously, and she waited for the message of good news to speak from the past. But only a tap dripped and a saucer grated gently in the bowl of washing-up water.

"No, Miss Sarah." She was crying openly now, making no sound as she smudged away the tears with the rounded back of her hand.

Maurice Sacton had been one of Robert's squadron leaders and now worked in the public relations office of the RAF. He assured Sarah that he would get all the

information possible from friends in the Intelligence Branch, and arranged to meet her for lunch at Claridge's. They sat on a banquette with their backs to the tall windows and ordered their food quickly.

"Before you begin, Maurice, please don't cover anything up out of kindness. It's far better to know everything once and for all."

"Yes, of course. But I warn you it's not very cheerful."

She smiled stiffly. "I promise I won't disgrace you."

He told her everything there was to be known. Then he opened his wallet and took out a piece of tracing paper showing the coast of Spain from Valencia to the French border and the towns along the coast. Just north of Barcelona was a circle seventy-five miles in diameter.

"It's as certain as anything can be that the plane broke up in that area."

"Wouldn't it have to pass through the centre to get broken up?"

"Not necessarily. You get these terrific up and down draughts, as well as lightning, over the whole area."

"They'd have parachutes and Mae West things, wouldn't they?"

"Yes. But when a plane breaks up in mid-air it usually happens so quickly that there's not much question of being able to jump. If it got struck it might have exploded."

"What's your honest opinion, Maurice?"

"This was six days ago. If it had happened yesterday I might have said there was one chance in ten of Robert turning up; they could have force-landed on the coast, or even into the drink and had time to launch a dinghy. I've no idea why Robert was coming home, except it was for duty, but the 'I' boys have really gone to town doping out where the plane crashed. They must have a good

reason for this, and if he had been picked up by a French or Spanish boat, or got ashore somehow, I think we should have heard by now. The Spaniards would intern him, but they would pass on the information. If a French boat picked him up the chances are he would be taken to Marseilles or Toulon, and you can hardly cough there without it being heard in London. I should say it's now ninety-five per cent certain that everyone on the plane was killed. And if you don't hear anything within the next three months your last chance has gone." His face was shiny with effort, but Sarah did not notice.

"I see. There's one other faint chance though. I believe a great friend of ours, a Frenchwoman, might be living inland from Perpignan, near the Pyrenées. If he did get ashore somehow it might not be too difficult to get there, given luck. Edmee would hide him."

"Do you want me to tell the 'I' boys that? They could check up in a matter of days."

She hesitated. "I don't want to get her into any trouble. It's only a faint chance . . . could it be done safely?"

"I should try it. If she's not Resistance she'll be glad to get rid of him. If she is it won't matter anyway. Of course, there are risks, but once they take over it's a good bet they'll deliver him safely to London."

"All right, I'll give you her name and address. Can I have that map?"

When they parted Sarah suddenly, and with a sinking heart, remembered her mother-in-law. She spent the afternoon dry-eyed in Wimbledon, and then drove her father down to Sevenoaks.

After five days Maurice phoned Sarah and told her that Robert had not arrived at her friend's house, but that if he did certain arrangements had been made. She

asked whether he had anything to tell her that could not be said on the phone, but there was nothing.

She wrote to him immediately, thanking him for everything he had done. It was evening, and she took her car to post the letter and then drove on a few miles to an inn where she and Robert had occasionally gone. There were soldiers in the bar and she carried her beer out to the garden at the back. As she sat down she decided that Robert was dead, until the miracle that would not happen brought him back to life. The garden and the sky, her chair and the iron table, did not dissolve away as she accepted this.

The problems arising from this acceptance came to her mind as she watched, without seeing, the racemes and leaves of a laburnum move soundlessly in the evening air . . . she was alone now, and must think for herself . . . but really not for herself; for the image of herself that had existed in Robert's mind; and again, not for that image, but the image that he would want her to be. If she could become like that she would never lose him, as long as *she* lived *he* would live through her. The memory of their last morning came back to her, hazy with time. The necessity to accept yet escape from misery. First that; then she would try to plan her life as he would have done.

It sounds easy now, she thought: it's all blurred and huge, soon it will focus into sharp lines of pain. Then it will be difficult, and I shall have to beware of giving way too soon, like the boy in his ward who sometimes fainted when the nurse reached out to change his dressings. Her own wounds would be touched. Mary had to be faced and a host of other people. The house in Chelsea, even her father, everything appeared a potential enemy. Michael would soon be writing, and *that* she somehow dreaded.

For the first time she could feel tears press behind her eyes. She stood up quickly, wrenching her mind away. As she drove back to Sevenoaks she told herself angrily that tears were useless.

The next morning, as she mechanically did her housework and pondered how best to carry out Robert's wish and escape from misery, she was suddenly shocked by the realisation that not to suffer would involve her in far harsher battle than merely to give way. Beneath the surface revolt against unhappiness there were strange attractions tempting her to take the line of least resistance, to reminisce about Robert with her father, to gaze at his photograph, read his letters, handle his clothes, all these things she longed to do for the sweet pain they offered. Then she remembered that he had said the most difficult cures were the best. She did not know whether he was right, but in her present frame of mind that was beside the point. She would follow his instructions.

Ever since her lunch with Maurice, Sarah had vaguely planned on leaving Sevenoaks and joining a branch of the women's forces, or asking for war work somewhere in the Midlands. Now she understood that her best chance of recovering swiftly would be to stay at Sevenoaks. It seemed more difficult, but in fact it would be far easier. To live in an unfamiliar place and do unaccustomed work would incessantly chafe at her mind, the very strangeness would bring about a remembrance of the past. And she did not think she would be strong enough to resist the curiosity of people; inevitably she would make friends and under their prompting would speak of Robert. Here at Sevenoaks there were hardly any of her own friends left, and they would soon know everything and refrain from asking questions.

Here she would have all the advantages of anonymity, and, in these so familiar surroundings, could remain anonymous even to herself.

She was still too shocked and sick with misery to plan coherently for the future, but by the end of May she had dealt swiftly and efficiently with what she regarded as day-to-day threats from the past. She wrote to Mary and said that for the time being she would prefer to be alone; she wrote to large numbers of their friends, telling them the bare facts and asking them to pass on the information to others who may have known them. She suggested that when they did this they should ask such people not to write. She packed up all Robert's personal belongings at Sevenoaks and Chelsea, and these were stored. Her only act of sentimentality was to use her favourite dressing-case for all his photographs and letters, and these she put away as carefully as though she intended them for posterity.

The letter from Michael fulfilled her worst fears. It was not only extravagantly distraught but stressed the pointlessness of Robert's journey and the abominable luck of encountering a storm of such severity at that time of the year. (For both surmises Michael only drew a bow at a venture, though Sarah did not know this.) But she had already shut her mind against this letter, and now that Robert was dead it no longer seemed to matter how it had come about. In a postscript Michael told her that he was returning some mail which Robert had not received. When they arrived one of them was the letter in which she had told him of her sterility.

She answered Michael brusquely, asking him to write again at some future time but not to speak of Robert.

Initially this guarding against the past occupied much of her time. But as the activity died away she busied

herself more and more with household work, evolving a routine which left her fully occupied until the evening. She found that the most dangerous time of the day was the hour she spent with her father before dinner, when her usual martinis or sherry stirred her memories. She soon learnt that the immediate fortitude with which she could face these had to be paid for as she lay alone in bed, waiting for sleep. She stopped drinking altogether, and, with a somewhat wry smile, busied herself instead with knitting complicated comforts for the troops.

By the time June began to slip into July the ceaseless round of housework she had imposed on herself was no longer sufficient to leave her tired out each night, and now she began to undertake the heavier work of the garden, increasing this little by little as her muscles hardened. August came; wasps ate into the fallen plums, the leaves of the lime trees turned yellow and fell; September passed. When Mrs. Logan had commented on how the days were drawing in, Sarah had reached the stage where physical exhaustion became more and more difficult to achieve and its power to dull her senses less and less.

"I'm afraid I've turned out to be rather a summer gardener, Daddy. I started to take against it as soon as the dahlias got full of earwigs. There's practically nothing nice left now; I just can't work up any enthusiasm about cabbages."

It was a Sunday evening in the middle of October, and they stood arm in arm on the lawn.

"You've done wonders, my dear. If it hadn't been for you the place would have been a wilderness. Just look at your hands! And you've lost weight."

She held out her hands, looking at the stained and calloused palms half ruefully, half with pleasure. But

although Mr. Valmont had spoken of her hands it was really her face which had prompted his remarks. The light summer tan could not disguise that it was drawn, nor hide the faint lines at her eyes and mouth, the slight coarsening of the texture of the skin.

"Let's go in, Daddy, you'll catch cold soon." She took his arm and they walked slowly towards the house. She glanced back at the garden, suddenly happy that she had confessed her growing discontent with what had become a slavery. "Let's celebrate tonight, and have some wine with dinner. We've still got plenty."

"What's the occasion?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, nothing. Let's just celebrate, that's all."

Sarah was celebrating victory. She had set out to do what Robert would have wanted her to do and now, after five months, she felt that she had succeeded. She appreciated that this was partly due to time itself, the drag of days and hours that had slowly deposited its dust over everything, good or bad. But her own efforts were chiefly responsible, for she had not indulged herself by trying to keep a shining image. She had allowed the dust to settle, layer by layer, deliberately occupying and exhausting herself so that she should not be tempted to polish the mirror of her mind.

And now she was deeply grateful for Robert's warnings. Without them she could not imagine how she would have behaved nor what might have come about; the least of the possible ills, she thought, would have been month upon month of protracted agony. This deep gratitude seemed to absorb all her most poignant memories. She had been afraid that she would remember their intimacies, re-live the hours they had spent naked in each other's arms; the touch of his stroking hands and

the heavy weight of his body. She had feared the coming back of intangible emotions which no effort of will could either evoke or refuse, such things as that velvet and unique emotion after compulsion is past, when kisses (still given and received, but passionless) seemed to contain all their passion and their love, past, present and to come.

And she had been afraid too of nightmare thoughts, of visualising his rotting body floating in blue water, bloated with gas, a flap of hairless white scalp moving slowly to expose white bone. Or suspended motionless above dark slime at the bottom of the sea, while fish sucked the shredded tongue against which she had pressed her own. As the weeks passed she had imagined, and sometimes with sickness, these natural things. But it was not a sickness of disgust, only of pity and her own inability to alleviate the indignities that befall the bodies of unburied men. And as for desire, that also had come. But to begin with she had been too unhappy for desire, then this increasing gratitude she felt took away its sting, making it appear almost incestuous.

This was an unexpected benefit, and an added cause for gratitude. But something far more unexpected was slowly taking place in the depths of her mind, something of which she was faintly aware but deliberately refused to acknowledge. She had brought herself to a point where she had almost destroyed her pain and, as the agony diminished, she was no longer afraid to allow herself traces of hope.

A soundless voice was suggesting all the time that perhaps somewhere, by some miracle, Robert was still alive.

(II)

That night, drinking the unaccustomed wine and feeling its strength, her thoughts moved a little into the future, away from what had become a day-to-day existence.

"You know, Daddy, I ought to start thinking about the future. If I don't somebody else will; I shall suddenly find myself screwing on shell caps at Woolwich, or having a shower-bath of oil beneath a three-tonner."

"Would you mind very much?"

"No . . . but I'd rather choose for myself. And I don't awfully feel like being herded in with a lot of strangers. I've come to enjoy my solitude rather. After all, being with you is the best sort of solitude. More than company and yet somehow less, or does that sound rude?"

"I understand perfectly. But you shouldn't come to rely on it."

"You're talking like Robert now." She smiled across the table.

"Am I? I'm glad. But I mean it. In any case I'm too old for you to be with. You ought to get away from here more, especially now winter's coming, and just doing housework will soon pall, I hope. It's been a good medicine, Sarah, but I don't think you need it any more." He paused. "I would have suggested you joined one of the services."

"Why don't you?"

"Because I hardly think it'll be worth while. Personally I'm certain the war will be over in a couple of years, maybe less. Whatever you join will only be a stop-gap. Why don't you consider coming with me to the City? I'm terribly short-staffed."

"Daddy! That's ridiculous."

"Why? It's as important as any other industry, far more so than some. All shellac is earmarked as essential war material. Varnishes, insulating material, records, plastics, thousands of things."

"But I'm completely untrained. I can't even type with two fingers."

"I don't expect you to type, and you don't know whether you can do the work I have in mind until you try. I was hoping Robert would carry on the firm, then——" he stopped in time. "But now, when I die, the business will have to be sold, and for a fraction of what it's worth because the buyers will say that I represent most of the goodwill. I've just made Emmanuel a director to try and counteract this. If you join now, even if you don't play a big part, it will put thousands on the value if you sell after my death. Think about it. I'll arrange a meeting this week with my accountants and solicitors and you come up for it. Even if you decide against it at least you ought to know the position before making up your mind."

There was a pause while Sarah took their plates to the sideboard and then he spoke again. "There's one other thing, Sarah, it's not really my business, except it does have a bearing on whether you join the firm or not. Do you think you'll marry again in a few years?"

"I doubt it, Daddy. I might change my mind, that's impossible to say. But somehow I don't think so, even if I could." Neither was aware of the significance of her last words.

To begin with, Mr. Valmont had thought her eventual remarriage highly probable, but now he was not so sure. The harsh discipline had outwardly brought a hard self-sufficiency, and he supposed that her sterility made marriage seem less attractive. He made no comment, but

secretly, and realising its selfishness, he was glad. He had been devoted to Robert in a way that he knew he could never again experience; for these two years he had possessed a beloved, if remote, son. And now his own love for Sarah was more deep than at any previous time. That Robert had fallen in love with her meant nothing, but that she should have been able to increase his love made her worthy of respect.

In spite of Sarah's initial reaction to her father's suggestion, the idea took root so rapidly that she could hardly understand why she had not thought of it herself. A fortnight later she sat down at an elegant desk in a corner of her father's private office.

"You're starting at a good time, Miss Sarah," Emmanuel said when he brought her a cup of tea. "The shellac trade is controlled now, so your father and I will have time to settle you in without the rough and tumble of paring prices to the last farthing, which is what we seemed to spend our lives doing before the war. In those days a slight mistake in judging quality meant a loss instead of a profit, and those days will come back. What *you* ought to concentrate on is judging the precise quality of each sample; without that knowledge you'll be at everybody's mercy. Office routine comes automatically after a time, and nearly all the legal side is simple, standardised forms for contracts of sale and bills of lading. There's a lot in front of you admittedly—income tax, company law, accounts, meeting customers; but unless you have a first-class knowledge of the commodity you're selling the only other useful thing to learn is how to wind up a company. So when you've finished your tea I suggest we start in our 'museum room'."

He showed her a dingy room containing row upon row of samples in glass-topped cases. He took out some large leather-bound albums. "We'll start at the beginning, how crude lac (stick lac it's called in the trade) is made by swarms of tiny insects."

He began to turn over the coloured photographs of the various types of trees which alone were capable of acting as host to the lac insect. She learnt that these minute insects (the largest being not quite as big as the head of a pin) hatched and swarmed at certain well defined periods of the year, settling in colonies of thousands on the new growth of their favourite trees. They pierced the tender bark with their proboscis, and sucked up the sap. The insects themselves were soft-bodied and defenceless; to counteract this they exuded a waxy substance which formed a protective case, hard and impervious to rain. Inside this case they lived their lives, the cells being raised up from the bark by the continued exudations of wax from their bodies.

After a few months the females produced their young and died. The young, unable to find a place to settle on the parent tree because all suitable wood was now covered with incrustations of lac, swarmed and infected other trees. The lac-infested branches of the old tree were then cut, and the cutting also acted as pruning. New growth came, and after a period of rest the tree was again ready for further colonies of insects.

He took out another book and showed her more photos, of the lac being stored in well-ventilated sheds so that the wood dried out and shrank, making it easier to scrape off. After the scraping it was very impure, bits of bark inevitably sticking to it and the smallest twigs still encased in a covering of lac. It had to be crushed and washed in huge vats, afterwards being spread out to dry in the sun and then winnowed.

"It looks like very coarse brown sugar then, Miss Sarah. They fill long tubes of white cloth with it, rather like preparing a huge roly-poly for boiling. They hold a section over a charcoal fire, and twist tightly, splashing it with water to start off so the cloth doesn't scorch. The lac inside melts and as the twisting continues it's squeezed out through the cloth, which strains off the rest of the impurities, or should do. The workmen are uncannily clever at this; it sounds easy, but it's not. It oozes out like golden toffee and they scoop it off with a large spoon on the end of a long stick and blob it on a sheet of metal, where it spreads a little and sets. Unless they get it at the exact temperature it's either too runny or too viscid. And they get the same amount off each time; all the blobs, button lac we call it, are exactly the same size. They sit there cross-legged hour after hour, the sweat pouring off them, and it couldn't be better done by machines."

"It sounds more unpleasant than difficult to me."

"No, you're wrong. I've made it sound easy, that's all. All the jobs have to be done meticulously. Considering the people who work for us are aborigines I'm amazed at the quality they turn out. Of course, Patras, the manager, knows the business inside out."

"Patras? What a funny name."

"It's their form of 'Peter'. He's a Catholic."

"An aborigine and a Catholic?"

"Yes, thousands of them are, but not so much round Bandhu."

"What exactly do you mean by aborigines? I thought they only lived in Australia."

"No, almost every country has its aborigines, original inhabitants. They usually get shoved into the most unproductive parts, like the Welsh mountains or the Highlands." Emmanuel looked at his watch. "What about

a cup of tea, Miss Sarah? And this afternoon you can come down to the docks with me, I have to look at a shipment that arrived yesterday. Unless you're too tired?"

Sarah wondered if he was being sarcastic, but he was not.

That evening she took the underground from the Monument to Sloane Square and then walked home. During the past fortnight she had come to agree with her father that it was time she began to lead a more independent life. She had toyed with the idea of taking a furnished flat in another part of London, and was still uncertain whether returning to Chelsea might not prove a mistake. But her affection for Mrs. Batchly as well as the house decided her at least to try. In any case she intended to spend each long week-end at Sevenoaks.

Mrs. Batchly came out of the kitchen as Sarah shut the front door. "How do you like being a career woman, that's what they call them, don't they, ma'am?"

"It seems all right, so far."

"That's right, ducky, keeps you out of mischief too." Mrs. Batchly had fallen into the habit of addressing Sarah on much the same principal as royalty. She called Sarah 'ma'am' the first time she spoke to her morning and evening, and thereafter it was 'ducky'.

"What time would you like supper? There's a nice bit of turbot."

"Oh, I don't know, it's six now; about half-past seven?"

"Suits me nicely. I'm so glad you've come 'ome; I don't like it much all on me own." She picked up Sarah's suitcase and took it upstairs.

Sarah went into the sitting-room and poured herself a glass of sherry. She wished now that she had taken her

own suitcase upstairs and unpacked. The room seemed very quiet and by the time she had read the evening paper there would be nothing to do, not even supper to get ready. But then she was bound to reel strange for a few days. She read the paper from cover to cover and still it was only twenty to seven. She checked an impulse to go and talk to Mrs. Batchly in the kitchen and turned on the wireless instead. She thought to herself that it was high time she left Sevenoaks. She missed it far too much.

And during the next month she was to miss many other advantages that she had not considered. She had thought she was only exchanging one kind of work for another, and that the ultimate effect would be the same. But she soon found that what she had done in the house alone was far more tiring than a day at the office, and not only more tiring but more satisfying. She enjoyed the process of learning, but she was still to learn that the office satisfied on fundamental need for her, not even the need to earn her living. Now at the end of each day she was bored and restless.

She had thought that mixing again with crowds of people, even unknown people, would constitute company of a sort. She had also expected that her work would bring a form of companionship with the other workers. To a point it did, and beyond that point it was impossible to go. There were only seventeen office staff, most of them middle-aged men and women, married, living at Leytonstone or Golders Green. Even if she had not been Mr. Valmont's only daughter they would still have had nothing in common. As it was, her position created an insuperable barrier. They liked her but they never considered inviting her home, nor did Sarah pretend to herself that she wanted them to. But yet she envied them.

And the crowded streets increased this feeling of envy, this desire for companionship. She began to do what she had never done before, study the faces of the hurrying men and women and wonder what their lives were like, whether they were happy, how many of them endured misery beside which her past misery would appear as nothing. But nearly all of them seemed shut in by invisible walls, their eyes turned inwards.

"Do you get a funny feeling watching crowds sometimes, Mrs. B?" It was seven o'clock and she was doing what had finally become a habit, helping to cook supper.

"Funny feeling, ducky? Not unless I get pinched, and that's only thanks to the black-out."

"You listen to the Light Programme too much. No, I mean about people being strangers, and why it is that you can never speak to them."

"I've never really thought about it. After all, that's life. You'd be the first to complain if everyone came up and started chin-wagging. But I shouldn't 'ave thought you'd 'ave 'ad much trouble if you wanted a chat to a stranger."

"That's the only sign of life I get out of them. The way some men look at you! And the things they get up to in the Underground."

"Can't think why you don't 'ave a taxi instead of that."

Sarah ignored the remark, hardly knowing herself why she preferred to use the Underground. "I suppose I must have noticed these things in the past, but if I did they never struck me as being disgusting, although I can't think why."

"Well, ducky, we all know some men can be beasts, we've all 'ad a bit of *that* in our time, but you'll 'ave to get used to it. A beautiful girl like you must expect to be insulted. You can always drop 'em one if they go too far."

"But even if they don't go too far it's not what I want from them."

Mrs. Batchly was even more puzzled than Sarah. "Well, I 'ope you know best what's good for you." She tried to sniff meaningly.

That night Sarah considered whether it would be better to give up the City and return to Sevenoaks, but dismissed the idea. It would be an admission of defeat, and to return to Sevenoaks would lead her nowhere. She came to the conclusion that she was making insufficient effort to help herself, and the following day she phoned Mary and invited her to visit. Mary was delighted to hear from her. She promised to come in a few days' time and to stay a week.

The visit was not a success. The first days were easy but even so such strands of their friendship as they picked up would not twist together again to form a cord. There were so many topics which they both avoided, Mary for fear of causing pain, Sarah fearing to embarrass Mary. In the past they had been bound together because their husbands were friends, and now that Robert was gone and Mary estranged from Michael the spring of their affection was running down. They discussed Michael at length and although Sarah agreed that he was in the wrong although she was more fond of Mary as a person, yet against her will her loyalties were with Michael.

When this visit ended Sarah began to contact former friends. She told herself that this would cure the increasing loneliness that London seemed to bring, and beneath this was a hidden wish to re-create the atmosphere she had previously known, and which was bound up with Robert. Although she did not immediately admit it, from the very beginning this attempt was a failure, if only for the obvious reason that since Robert had left England most of

their friends had either been posted abroad or were scattered throughout the country. But there were other causes. These friends believed that Robert was almost certainly dead, and their attitude to Sarah was changed. Now she was an individual, not a woman loved and in love with her husband.

It seemed to her as though no one was any longer capable of behaving naturally. She could understand why so many single men adopted a too attentive or protective attitude (though it did not lessen her exasperation), but it was the behaviour of their former married friends which she resented deeply. At first these meetings seemed successful, but she was too beautiful and too rich, the tragic ending of an ideal marriage was too romantic for most married women to tolerate her frequent presence, even if escorted. And at this time Sarah was unusually perceptive and sensitive to the moods of other people.

Even when there was no air of strain Sarah could not find what she was pursuing. Very slowly she came to understand that the deeply satisfying companionship of the past had only come to her through Robert, and very gradually she tired of the unrewarding hunt. But she could not forget that what she looked for had once existed and therefore might exist again; though faint, she still pursued.

(III)

It was about this time that dreams which she found inexplicable and revolting came to Sarah. In the past she had occasionally experienced erotic dreams (mild, quickly forgotten), but she could not remember having done so since her marriage. As far as she had thought about it at all she supposed such things to be a symptom of

youth, like boys' pimples. After Robert was missing she had expected to dream of him and had been half sorry, half relieved, as time passed and this had not happened: at Sevenoaks she had slept too deeply to remember what dreams had come.

But now, no longer physically tired out, her sleep sometimes broken by gun-fire and explosions and always fretted by the sounds of London, she began to dream.

They were vivid and yet confused, utterly satisfying and yet exacerbating her nerves to a point past dissatisfaction. They were revolting in detail, sometimes, and mostly concerned men that she thought physically repulsive. Men she had seen and yet had not seen: a hollow-chested waiter from a Soho restaurant, a taxi-driver, a bus conductor, some officer with the crumpled imbecile face of the very drunk. The pattern of her dreams was always similar. She would find herself following a man with the object of seeing his face. Not Robert's face. She did not know in her dream what she expected to see, it was only a compulsion to look. Sometimes she was able to catch up with the moving figure, sometimes the ground would hold her feet like a wasp on fly-paper. But if she did catch up and look, then she would see the face of her stranger.

She would want to vanish without a word, step back into the palpable mist which always shrouded her dreams. But the stranger would touch her and at once, still wanting above all else to leave, she would feel lust weight her limbs immovably. Standing up, bent back against some object she could never see, her stranger would begin to possess her and she would feel an all-pervading eroticism, a sickness of lust that she had never known in reality. She could feel the man move in every part of her body, while her body moved only to prolong what she craved to finish.

As her stomach and breasts began to well with blackness, as the air seemed thin and impossible to breathe, as she clung to the shadow more substantial than a rock, the faces of watchers would come out of the mist. And though she never saw Robert's face she knew that he was there, watching, hurt beyond pain and sick beyond disgust, while she writhed to break from the stranger, to cling to the stranger, to delay and yet feverishly to finish her orgasm.

It was not possible to forget these dreams at once. They were too vivid and too unusual. They did not carry any deep significance in her mind. They were disgusting and quite untrue, and though forced to remember she dismissed them as an example that dreams go by opposites. But the pleasure, so intense that it was far more real than reality itself, stayed in her blood like a pale worm.

(IV)

One Thursday evening towards the end of January Mrs. Batchly was clearing away supper while Sarah sat on at the table smoking. In the distance they heard an explosion and the windows rattled.

"Another bomb for the poor old south," Mrs. Batchly said. "They would start just as I was going to see my Vera. You're not going out, ducky?"

"Yes, just for a bit."

"To that den of yours I suppose?" But there was approval in her voice. She was glad Sarah had started going out again; since the New Year she had shown signs of sitting once more at home. "Well, you're just as likely to get a smack 'ere."

Sarah went to the sitting-room and sat down. When she had first tried to resume her old friendships she had fallen

into the habit of taking people to the club in Soho that she and Robert had used. By now she knew a number of people who went regularly, and could rely on finding someone to talk to. It was a measure of the failure of her attempt that she had begun to prefer going casually, for by doing this and insisting on paying for her own drinks she was free to leave as soon as she was bored. She looked at her watch and decided to wait until nine-thirty. She took her work-basket and began to stitch the seam of a split glove; there was another explosion, nearer this time, and the needle slipped and pricked her finger. She packed away her darning and went upstairs for her coat.

There were one or two officers and civilians at the bar, and sitting by himself on a narrow divan was a young flight lieutenant whose face seemed familiar to Sarah. He was dark, his eyes well spaced, his mouth generous. The skin of his face was curiously attractive, dark-shadowed from his morning shave, textured like a thick petal.

There was a girl at the bar whom Sarah knew slightly and she joined her; they were talking without animation when Gabrielle suddenly lowered her voice.

"Who's the boy friend on the sofa?"

"I don't know. I thought his face was familiar."

"Don't look now, but he hasn't taken his eyes off you since you came in. He's sweet too, I wouldn't mind a helping of that myself." Gabrielle's conversation after a few drinks was exclusively about men and she always imagined that some intrigue was commencing. Sarah glanced into the mirror behind the bar and saw his long steady stare. She lowered her eyes quickly.

For the rest of the evening she knew that he was watching her. She, too, thought that he was not unattractive, and from wondering why he did not come nearer the bar she began to wish that he would. But he made no

sign that he wanted to speak to her, only moving his position as the club filled up so that he could watch, and all the time his look seemed to infer, with a hint of sadness, that he knew he had no hope. She did not intend to encourage him, but even so his presence brought a form of happiness, she felt relaxed and cheerful and forgot her resolution not to drink too much. Shortly before the club shut she knew she had had enough, and when asked if she would go on to some night club she refused.

"Not tonight, I'm half tight as it is and I have to work tomorrow. You go on, I'll pick up a cab with any luck."

She watched them crowd down the narrow stairs, laughing and talking. As she went towards the cloak-room she saw the flight lieutenant slowly leave the club.

She reached the street and wished that she had gone with the others for an hour or so. It was very dark and no stars showed. She had only taken a few paces when a hand fumbled at her arm and pulled her into a doorway.

"Don't be frightened, Sarah," a voice whispered, "it's me."

For a moment she was confused by her own name, but not afraid. She stumbled against his foot and he put his arms around her and kissed her mouth as he sighed. The kiss was comforting and sweet to Sarah, delicate, almost apologetic. She gently touched the side of his face with her fingers, half expecting that now he would say good night and vanish. But her gesture released him, he unbuttoned her coat and his arms strained her to him. She could sense his urgency now, and a remembrance in her stirred.

"Will you come back with me?" he whispered.

"How do you know my name?"

"That doesn't matter. Will you come back with me? Please, please do."

She hesitated, feeling an immediate repulsion and yet still stirred.

"Where?"

"Very close. Rooms, not a hotel. My rooms, I'm alone."

She nearly said that it was impossible, but the comfort of another human being's arms was too strangely new for her to break away; she would have had to do violence to herself, and his words were evocative of something which she needed. The whisky she had drunk made it appear simple to go to his room and talk and kiss for a while and then to leave. But another part of her knew that if she went she would not go home.

"For a while, then I must go."

They walked a short distance and then he opened a door on a dark hall. He took her hand and without speaking led her up two flights of stairs; fumbled with the lock of his room. Still silent he led her in the dark to a narrow bed and gently pulled her down. If he had attempted any force she would have resisted him, but he seemed dazed, lying next to her as he kissed and whispered her name, telling her confusedly that she was too beautiful, and that he had not dared to speak, afraid of learning either that she would not or could not come with him.

"But I didn't really come back to sleep with you, only because I liked you. Sleeping with you isn't necessary."

"Please, Sarah, don't go now. But if you want to go you can. Please stay till the morning if it's possible. If it's not, you can go."

And she thought 'o herself: 'There's an expression for women like me if I go now. What does it matter, anyway? He's lonely and I like him.'

But when they had undressed and lay in the narrow bed

she wished above everything that she was alone at home. She had become so conditioned to Robert that what she was doing now, open-eyed in the darkness, hardly seemed like sex at all, merely a pleasureless indecency. Because of this, because of the inherent sadness of a first infidelity, she was reminded unbearably of Robert, and that in turn made this man's body seem almost to belong to another species, scarcely human, revolting in feel and shape and smell.

When he had finished and was asleep she lay awake in the darkness longing for sleep and the morning, knowing what would happen as soon as he awoke. Her last thought as sleep slowly came was that she did not even know his Christian name.

At seven o'clock she insisted on getting up and leaving. He had not understood her increasing coldness and reluctance, but he was half in love and certain that the fault was his. He got out of bed and dressed quickly. There was a gas ring in the dingy bathroom, and while he boiled a kettle to make her tea, he shaved feverishly and cut himself. In an excess of zeal he put in too much tea and then, afraid that she might be waiting to use the bathroom, filled the pot before the kettle boiled. There was only condensed milk. She sipped the not very warm and sickly brew, trying to pick out the floating leaves. Her head ached and her body felt it would never be clean again.

"Will you meet me for lunch, Sarah? What's your other name? You never asked mine."

"I can't have lunch, I have to work. And I'm going home tonight, out of town."

"You mean you don't want to."

"I can't. But I'm often at the club."

"Give me your London address. I'm only here a short time."

"It's 125 Sloane Avenue," she said glibly. "I'm not on the phone."

"And the name?"

Sarah paused. She could not bring herself to give her married name. She was full of a guilty grief, seeing the whole episode as a gross betrayal of Robert, thinking that this man would go back to the club and let it be known that he had slept with her by snapping his fingers, yet knowing too that these thoughts were unjust. She knew that he was suffering and that only she had done wrong. But even so she could not use her married name in this room, sitting on the edge of the bed with its dishevelled sheets. And she was sick of lying.

"Valmont," she said. She lied again. "I'll see you in the club Tuesday."

"That's a promise. You will come?"

"I will if I possibly can, but I won't promise and I can't explain. I must go now."

"I'll come with you and find a cab."

"No, don't! Don't come down." She faced his long sad kiss as best she could and left, hurrying down the dark stair. There were no cabs and she walked to Piccadilly for a bus. As she walked she was ashamed of her cruelty and indifference, ashamed, too, of what she regarded as a vile act. Then, illogically and wilfully, she wished that she had asked his name, and wondered what her reaction would have been if he had answered 'Robert'.

(V)

The deep remorse Sarah suffered from this episode was in some ways beneficial. She stopped going to the club in case she met him again and told the proprietor that if anyone made enquiries he was to say nothing. And in

order to forget what she had done she tried to submerge herself in the work of the office.

Already Mr. Valmont and Emmanuel were astonished by her progress, but although the true reason for this did not occur to either of them, it was, in fact, quite simple. There were hardly any other women in executive positions in the trade, and whereas men became expert because it was their business and business meant money, Sarah's approach was from a different angle. For her it was a problem similar to the buying of clothes or jewellery, an unruffled exercise of flair and taste. She possessed an uncannily accurate eye in the matter of colour, and once she had learnt the correct shades for the principal categories of lac she was able to carry that shade in her head as a comparison with every sample she handled. She became a familiar figure in the firm's warehouse, walking slowly through the gloomy rooms with her head slightly bent to listen to Emmanuel, pausing before some sample, taking it to a grimy window to judge the colour more exactly.

These warehouses, with their strange smells and air of peace and continuity, gave her great pleasure. The heavy masonry of their vaults and the knowledge that they had been used by generations of merchants contrasted sharply in her mind with the devastation through which she would have passed. Though she did not define it there was an air of freedom about these buildings next to the river, a link with an outside world other than burnt cities and littered battlefields, a world of which she had no real knowledge, one that now seemed the more attractive because she would have discovered it with Robert. Sometimes she remembered him more vividly here than in the house in Chelsea.

She now began to meet and entertain her father's more important customers. Inevitably the news had spread that

old Valmont's daughter had joined the firm to avoid war work, and so they were doubly prejudiced against her, although their main resentment lay in the thought of a woman doing work which had always been done by men. But she quickly showed her grasp of the more showy features of the trade, and when she set herself out to be pleasant they soon capitulated. She entertained them in smart restaurants and let them talk about themselves. They began to tell their wives that she was a most attractive and intelligent woman doing a magnificent job in an essential industry.

Although her remorse was genuine it did not last in an acute form for more than a month. Once again she began to chafe at the sensation that she was boxed off from the rest of humanity. She had kept to her resolve not to go back to the club, not through any fear of seeing the flight lieutenant again but because now she felt it was worse than a waste of time. If she went regularly it was certain that she would do again what she had found degrading and unpleasant. But she missed the easy atmosphere and familiar faces.

Sarah tried her best to escape the shadow once more creeping towards her. She gathered up the hard core of her friends and saw to it that each week was full. The only night that she deliberately spent alone was Monday, when she was tired after a long week-end of housework at Sevenoaks. The rest of the week she either asked people in or herself went out, even if only to a cinema.

She found that all this effort merely increased her need.

One Friday in the middle of March Sarah ate an early lunch and walked towards the Tower. It was a lovely day,

a soft day when the winter seems past and even the harsh weather still to come is touched with pink-streaked blossom. A few low fleecy clouds drifted towards the west, and as she walked she remembered that sunlight was warm.

She made her way along the promenade between the river and the moat, loitering beneath the plane trees as she looked idly at the cannons threatening the far bank. The fine day had produced a crowd of City workers throwing the crusts of sandwiches to the pigeons, and children played on the strip of dirty sand beneath the embankment. She saw a boat coming up-stream and moved to the crowded rail to watch Tower Bridge being raised. An American officer made way for her, and she smiled her thanks.

They watched in silence and when the crowd dispersed she offered him a cigarette.

"Gee! Thanks." His startled shyness amused Sarah as being so contrary to the usual reputation of American troops.

"You haven't been away from the States long, have you?"

"No, just a week in London, and am I home-sick!"

"Where do you come from?"

"New Orleans. Have you been there?" And when she shook her head he said: "I just want to meet one person who knows New Orleans and then I'll be happy and forget it. Right now the magnolias'll be out. Do you have magnolias in England?"

"Yes, we do. Aren't there any men from New Orleans with you?"

"No. I fly transports and we get mixed around. Besides, I wouldn't talk about magnolias to another Southerner, he'd think I was corny, which I guess I am." And they both laughed.

"But you must have lots of friends, you must be stationed somewhere."

"Not really, I'm waiting an assignment, maybe anyplace. I'm in a kind of transit camp, if you could call it that. To me it's just a lousy bed in an old barn of a house near Belgrave Square. And the other guys there are just tail . . . they just hunt up liquor and girls all the time."

"Not all Americans spend their time like that," Sarah said, wishing to be polite.

"I must be unlucky then, that's all this lot seem to do. Me, I'm not interested, I've only been married six months. But am I lonely!" Like the involuntary saliva of a hungry man at the smell of food, so he reacted to the word lonely, feeling his eyes large with remembered love for his wife and home. Excessively sentimental, he tried to hide this from himself, and having given way he must correct the balance. Her beauty made this easy, for though he recognised it as beauty, for him it did not carry desire. The scar he could just see emphasised the sadness in her eyes, and she was older than himself. He liked very young women, girls who were gay and smart of tongue except in the making of love. "I suppose if I asked you to take in a movie tonight you'll think I'm just a goddam hypocrite."

She knew that he spoke the truth, that he was lonely, and to her he seemed very naïf, very human. She was sorry for him; if she had not been going to Sevenoaks she would have accepted.

"I would, but I'm going home."

"Where's that?"

"In Kent."

"Gee, you're lucky!" Now he made no attempt to hide his envy.

"Perhaps you would like to come down tomorrow and stay until Sunday?" She offered the invitation as naturally as though she had known him a long time, her motives uncomplicated by any other wish than to relieve his tedium and depression.

"Say, I couldn't do that!" He was shocked. "My wife would flay me if she knew. Besides, I'm . . . we're . . ."

"Of course. But that needn't stop you coming to Sevenoaks. I'm married too, my husband is missing. He was in the Air Force. I wasn't asking you to spend the week-end with me, but at my home. I live with my father." She stopped, breathless, feeling ridiculous and angry. She was about to leave but he checked her.

"I didn't mean to sound that way. I can tell. . . . It was just surprise at asking a stranger to your home that confused me. I'd be proud to come."

"I've just picked up an American, at the Tower, Daddy, and asked him down for the week-end. Well, Saturday and Sunday. Captain Roger Savin. He was lonely, poor mite. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Is he a mite?"

She paused, then laughed slightly. "Now I come to think of it he's rather tall and good-looking or I probably shouldn't have felt so sorry for him. But he's quite safe, he's madly in love with his wife."

As she drove to the station Sarah was looking forward to the week-end. She had not come in contact with many Americans, but she had found them uncomplicated and companionable. It would be refreshing to be with someone so essentially a stranger, quite unable to visualise Robert or their life together. She had no intention of

treating Roger as other than a friend. And in a few days he would leave London.

He arrived with a small suitcase and a large cardboard box. "I thought you'd be short of things, so I went to the P.X."

"That's very sweet of you, you must have brought enough for a month." She was grateful, and unprepared for the lavishness of the parcel when she unpacked it, large tins of ham and turkey meat, rice, egg powder, cigarettes and two bottles of Scotch.

During these few moments of arrival and the drive to the house Roger watched closely for any hint that Sarah's interest was other than mere kindness. Deeply and possessively in love with his wife, he viewed his own fidelity as a *porte-bonheur* for hers. He thought that Sarah was unhappy and perhaps looked for consolation, but it did not occur to him that she could be more lonely than himself. There were no signs, however, and in an obscure way the very size of the house helped him to relax. He had wondered what he was going to, and now he was agreeably impressed.

Yesterday's fine weather was to last over the week-end, and soon after their arrival Sarah took him into the garden. Spring had aroused her interest again, and while he talked she began absent-mindedly to pull up the first weeds. Soon they were both busy, and by the time Mr. Valmont joined them, protesting against the guest being put to work so soon, Roger's suspicions were forgotten.

Sarah enjoyed the week-end more than she had enjoyed anything for almost a year. The unexpectedly lovely weather, still and warm, the sky milked with the faintest haze, called for a lavish use of petrol, and that afternoon they drove through the wooded hills towards Lingfield.

They stopped the car and walked through the dead bracken, the first anemones and white violets; through the wood coloured with sunlight. They found a tiny brook which in the summer would be dry, and from racing twigs they began to build a dam, watching while the water crept higher and the dam gave way.

They had tea in the kitchen, and then sat in the lounge by the open french windows, drinking Roger's whisky and talking while the garden slowly slipped into the shadows and only a clump of white crocus showed by the edge of the lawn.

"Gosh, I feel fine," Roger said. "What have you got in mind for tonight?"

"We could dance at the local club, there's a radiogram. But I thought it would be more fun to show you some of the local pubs, the very old ones. You can try our flat warm beer and bump your head on beams." After dinner they drove to two or three villages, and Roger revelled in what she had always taken for granted.

He had to return on Sunday evening and she was glad. Her happiness had been unreflecting until then, and when she became aware of it she was afraid that it would not last, was too fragile to stand a stilted farewell at Cannon Street in the noisy gloom and hurry of a Monday morning. And she refused his invitation to dinner on Monday night, unconsciously wanting a short interval to separate the week-end from the stream of time. He did not press her, and they arranged to meet in Chelsea on Tuesday for early supper and a film.

When she returned from the station she went into the lounge, yawning.

"Tired, Sarah?"

"No . . . not exactly, Daddy. But I *have* enjoyed the week-end."

"So have I. He's a charming boy, your American. I wonder how long they'll let him stay in London?"

"Not long, you can bet your life on that." There was no regret in her voice; she accepted the briefness of such encounters as inevitable and natural. It was this acceptance which made Mr. Valmont feel sudden pity for her, although he hoped that Roger would leave immediately. There had been an elusive quality about his face which reminded him uncomfortably of Robert.

Mrs. Batchly was also impressed by Roger, who arrived with yet another parcel as extravagant as the first. That alone was enough to endear him, but mostly she was pleased by the way he treated her, and lost no time in telling Sarah so the following morning.

"Real nice, that Yank. Treats you as though you were 'uman. Most people give you their coat and a sweet smile and say good evening, but they don't *mean* it. *I'm* only the skivvy, they 'ardly know me name and don't want. Women are the worst, they always are. But 'e came right up, 'eld out 'is 'and and *asked*. What do you think of that?"

"Rather sweet. It just doesn't happen to be our custom, that's all."

"Well it ought to be. I don't want 'im or anyone else smarming me, but I like it. And all that food too. Wish I was your age and 'ad your looks. I don't wonder our girls are falling over themselves to get put in the family way. Wish my Vera had waited a bit. Married?"

"Very much so."

"Shame, nice young chap like that. 'E wants mothering, that's easy to see." She hesitated as she poured coffee for Sarah, thinking deeply whether to say what was in her mind. She began to stalk her o'jective. "You ought to

ask him to stay, if 'e's only 'ere a short time. There's the spare room."

"I don't want him to stay. And what would people say if I did?"

"If you knock about with 'im much they'll say it, true or false. But if you ever did want anyone to stay I shouldn't see nothing wrong in it. Still, that's not my business." And before Sarah could answer she left the room.

Sarah's week was already fully planned but she cancelled her engagements. She told Roger frankly what she had done, saying that they were people she could see at any time. They met every evening, and on Thursday she asked if he would come again to Sevenoaks.

"Couldn't you stay in London, Sarah? We only meet evenings; I'd like to see Hampton Court and the Zoo, that stuff."

Sarah saw more of London that week-end than she usually saw in a year. On Saturday and Sunday Roger came to Chelsea in time for late breakfast and they spent the whole of each day together. He would take her arm as they crossed a street, or momentarily catch her hand as he pointed to something that amused or interested him. These gestures pleased her, were tokens that she was not alone.

Most of their talk had been of Roger, not because he was grossly self-centred, but it was he who wished to remember. Even so there was a limit to this and as his affection increased so did his curiosity. She found herself telling him more and more about Robert; it was the first time she had done this, and in its release was a painful pleasure. Roger quickly succumbed to pity: having no hidden wish that she should give up hope he refused to let her talk of Robert as though he was dead, and as he emerged from the shadows Roger unconsciously became more demon-

strative. Both were in love with someone else, there was no harm if they lightly held hands in a taxi, if they briefly, fraternally, kissed good night.

Sarah expected each day to be the last, and it was this transiency which snared her into a form of love. But she was also snared by the very fact that love was impossible, if only because of loyalty for Robert. Since it was impossible it seemed safe to indulge it, moreover its impossibility cloaked its oncoming. Her mind was shut against the signs that she was becoming too fond, was even shut against the bright quickening of her blood.

A fortnight later he was still unposted. That Saturday evening they went to a theatre and came back to Chelsea for late supper. They arranged to meet as usual on Sunday and Roger left to walk back to his billet. She read in bed for a while and as she was about to put out the light she heard the front gate squeak. She knew at once that it was Roger and was half-way down the stairs when the door-bell rang.

"Gee, Sarah, I'm sorry to disturb you, I just had to see you!"

"You've been posted." She shut the door and began to walk slowly upstairs while Roger followed. She got into bed and he sat on the edge, handing her a paper. "Karachi! Where on earth's that?"

"I'd never heard of the place either, but it's kind of north-west of Bombay. And look when I have to leave, ten o'clock tomorrow morning!"

"Oh, Roger . . . the week-end . . . you'll be away months and months . . .!" Disappointment and anger were like an acid in her chest; without warning she was crying. Suddenly, as though the acid had eaten its way to some encrusted nerve, she realised that this was the first time she had cried since Robert had gone, and believing

that she cried for someone else hurt with an intensity that reached to Roger. He put his arm around her quickly, drawing her close, laying his fingers against her lips, half in pity, half in fear that Mrs. Batchly might hear. She kissed his fingers, lifted her head and kissed his mouth with the hunger of misery. And Roger, confused and upset by the sudden violence of her grief, miserable on his own account, feeling her arms about him and the hunger of her kiss, intending merely to comfort her, forgot the vows he had made to himself. When her tears stopped he turned out the light.

Half an hour later he got out of bed and began to feel for his clothes. She lifted her head, chilled and a little incredulous.

"What are you doing, Roger?"

"Taking off." He was filled with remorse, angry with himself and her. His cold voice touched a chord of memory.

"Must you, so soon? It's terribly early."

"Yeah. I must. If you ask me, it's terribly late." There was cruelty in his mimic of the word 'terribly'. He hoped that Sarah would not put on the light, and when she did he turned his back irritably. "Aw, hell, wait till I find my pants!"

"I'm sorry, I'm not looking." She thought his behaviour stupid; whatever he felt, it was unnecessary and undignified to show it so plainly. And Roger was thinking what a fool he had been, trusting a woman to be content with friendship. He thought of his own wife with longing, comparing the clean joy he had known with what now appeared as a tear-stained orgy of sex. She would insist on getting up and cry again.

"Would you like a drink?"

"No! No, thanks. For God's sake don't wake Mrs. Batchly, I don't want her to know I've been here. Stay

right where you are, I'll be through dressing in a flash."

Sarah looked at him with contempt and left the room. In the sitting-room she mixed herself a whisky and soda. By the time he had dressed his first reactions were fading. He came down and smiled wanly at her; she mixed him a drink and they stood awkwardly by the empty fireplace, silent. There was nothing to say, Sarah thought, he hates me for what he's done, and I can't blame him; I'm glad it's turned out like this, glad I've been punished for not having the brains to stop the minute it started. She spoke suddenly. "I'm sorry, Roger, it was my fault entirely. Forget it, it's of no importance."

He muttered a half-hearted derisive. Realising that she was not going to cry or lay some claim on his affection he could relent toward her. "I'll write you when I get to this Karachi dump."

"Yes, do." She was thankful for this gesture, but she knew that her incipient love was gone. At some moment in the bedroom it had snapped and could never join again. Even their brief companionship had lost its warmth, yet she still dreaded the good-bye that would soon come, and that would be for ever.

He finished his drink. "Thanks a lot, Sarah, for everything. I'll write. I'll be back again, maybe. Next time we'll be smarter, eh? I'm sure it was my fault."

He embarrassed her. They kissed each other awkwardly on the cheek. Then she went with him to the front door.

"Take care of yourself, Roger." She watched him reach the gate and half salute; then he was out of sight. She went back to her untidy bed.

Mrs. Batchly had heard Roger return last night and also the sound of crying. She was worried, and had stayed

awake listening to the silence, and then she heard him leave. Sarah did not come down until well past their usual time for breakfast, and Mrs. Batchly decided to enquire.

"Where's the Captain today, ma'am?"

"On his way to India by now, I imagine."

"Dear Lord! Where will they think to send 'em next? When's he coming back?"

"I've no idea, Mrs. B. I don't think he plans on visiting here any more."

Sarah's dryly sarcastic tone of voice told Mrs. Batchly a great deal. She sighed. "Not a very 'appy good-bye either, by the look of you. You'd better get off to Sevenoaks and forget it. Trouble, I suppose?"

"I suppose you could call it trouble." She looked at her watch. "I think I will go to Sevenoaks. If I hurry I can just catch the quarter to eleven. Phone Daddy for me."

"I will, ducky. Never mind, better luck next time as the monkey said, although I can't remember what 'appened to the poor beast on that occasion."

(VI)

This affair affected Sarah out of all proportion to its fleeting intensity. Once Roger had gone she did not suffer at all on his account and was relieved she had escaped so lightly. She did not even feel resentment, for she believed that in these matters everyone was both forced and at liberty to behave according to their given character.

But although her emotion was ashes it had flared briefly, for during those measureless minutes as she had clung to Roger's counterfeit she had almost found release from herself, almost re-experienced completeness. In a shadowy way it seemed that over the past months a deadly bitterness had formed inside her, of pointless austerities of mind

and body, of a pointless search (for what, she hardly knew). At least it all seemed pointless now, dung-coloured and flat compared to the fire of colour she had glimpsed through Roger. And in that fire this bitterness had gone and love for Robert re-emerged.

Sarah did not think of it like this, for the joy of escaping both from Roger and this period of morbidity would not allow her to do more than plan the future and review the past in any but the simplest terms. The most important fact to her was that having been brushed again by a form of love, remembered love for Robert had flooded back. The seeds of hope in his survival which had been slowly germinating now pushed through and showed pale green.

The day after Roger left she enquired at the Spanish Embassy whether it would be possible to visit Spain, and was told that although as far as they were concerned she could go it was almost certain the British authorities would not give permission. Her application to the Foreign Office was refused. Then she turned to Maurice. Through a chain of people she contacted a man in Barcelona, Miguel Telon, and employed him to begin enquiries. She promised to visit Barcelona as soon as possible and pay Miguel for work done (though how exactly she would do this she did not know). And Miguel, making enquiries in turn, learnt that she was rich and could probably be relied on to keep her word.

His first report spoke vaguely of a foreigner, believed to be an Englishman, who three months ago had passed through Gerona towards the Pyrenees. She hurriedly phoned Maurice.

"God knows, I don't want to discourage you, Sarah," he said, "but you're crazy to place any reliance on this sort of rumour. You'll just get worked up and pay the earth for nothing."

Deep down, Sarah knew all this. It was one thing to resurrect Robert in her heart, quite another to believe it absolutely in her mind. And highly dangerous as well, for if she believed too firmly she might only find a stone of disappointment.

This co-existence of belief and disbelief, though natural, confused and weakened Sarah. It formed one of the horns of her dilemma to which the affair with Roger had opened her eyes. She was in love with Robert and wanted above all else to preserve that love, because to her it represented a supreme good. But she was also compelled to want happiness (though it was a word she shrank from using). Under the circumstances the two compulsions seemed irreconcilable; being compulsions Sarah was compelled to try.

She did not ponder over this problem. Subconsciously it filled her mind and quickly solved itself. She wanted both, so she would have both. She would lock Robert away until she could personally either find him alive or, if only by the passage of time, prove him dead. And until such time she would take what happiness she could.

She did not have to solve the problem of the nature of happiness, for her human nature had always whispered louder than words that happiness was bound up with human love. And she had proved that empirically. She had known her greatest happiness with Robert, those few years when in a way she had been least conscious of herself. Happiness had become synonymous with love, and love as Sarah knew and understood it was in turn dangerously close to a synonym for sexual friendship. But she knew that her love for Robert had gone beyond that, was safely out of reach to all but her. Had Roger wished, it was possible he might have ruined her love for Robert. . . she would take good care that no one else was given such power.

She had no intention of being promiscuous. All she wanted was enjoyment and freedom, and that would entail associating with men: for preference men she found attractive. She had always been attracted, she could remember her two lovers before Robert (incredible as they now seemed); she knew that even during her marriage she had often looked at some man and understood that she could have been attracted. She would say quite openly: "What an attractive man! Robert, do look," although the idea of intercourse with him either never entered her head or was actively distasteful. Nor had these remarks been attempts to make Robert jealous, for she knew, rather regretfully, that he was invulnerable to this form of jealousy. But though her interest had been academic it had also been spontaneous.

Knowing all this, having the knowledge reaffirmed, she realised that in giving herself freedom inevitably she would be tempted. In her special case it hardly occurred to her to resist temptation, for provided no one else was hurt Sarah did not even agree with the conventional disapproval expressed by most people. There were other reinforcing factors. She was infected by the contagion that life was short, that friends came and went and should be enjoyed as quickly and fully as possible. She did not crave for security or children; her wealth removed one, her barrenness the other. She no longer thought of love in terms of years, of settling down: that was all for Robert. She thought of it now only as intense pleasure.

To acquire it she merely had to smile.

(VII)

This certainty had the somewhat strange effect of starting Sarah on a period of making cakes. Having given

herself freedom she was content to stay at home, no longer feeling that she was irretrievably missing something, some person. She began to amuse herself in the kitchen, experimenting with ambitious cakes. It was April, and she had found a rich source of supply for fresh eggs at one of the public-houses near a farm at Sevenoaks. And Mrs. Batchly, who disapproved violently of the black market but who could never resist the offer of an extra chop or a quarter of a pound of margarine, threw herself into the game with zest, and soon found a grocer who traded their surplus eggs into sugar.

"That grocer's a proper rogue, ducky," she would say, gloating over the result of her latest barter. "I'd like to know what other fiddles he's up to." She could never quite suppress the note of regret in her voice.

It was cake-making and a lapse of memory on Mrs. Batchly's part that led to Sarah's meeting with Sergeant Joseph Tinley. She had decided to make a lemon meringue pie, and Mrs. Batchly had forgotten to buy shell-shaped macaroni as a weight on the short pastry to prevent it swelling. Shortly before closing time she remembered, hurried to the King's Road and bought the packet. Then she forgot that there was no longer any need to hurry and stepped off the pavement without looking. Sergeant Tinley braked his jeep in time to do no more than topple her off her balance and bruise her leg.

Both of them were too frightened for anger. He helped her to her feet and picked up the packet. Mrs. Batchly, instinctively wishing to avoid any contact with the police, assured everyone she was unhurt and quickly accepted his offer to drive her home.

He was still in the kitchen, drinking the tea he found quaint and eating the cake he thought excellent, when Sarah arrived from the City.

"I've got a nice American for you, ma'am, shut up in the kitchen," Mrs. Batchly whispered to her in the hall. "He knocked me down in his jeep," she added, pulling up her skirt and showing Sarah the slightly torn stocking.

"You weren't hurt, were you?" Sarah asked quickly.

"No, ducky. A bit bruised and shaky, but I took the liberty of a drop of brandy and gave 'im some."

Sarah went into the kitchen and Tinley stood up.

"The name's Joe Tinley, ma'am."

As they shook hands he moved his forefinger slightly against her wrist.

He returned the following evening, having forced an invitation out of Sarah by skilfully suggesting that he had saved Mrs. Batchly's life, wrapped up with the plea that he had not eaten lemon meringue pie for more than a year, and did not believe anyone except his mother could make it. He was encouraged by Mrs. Batchly, who was never to forget the first favourable impression that an American had made on her. Moreover her store-cupboard was showing signs of giving way under Sarah's almost nightly raids. And when he did arrive with the inevitable parcel of food he also brought Mrs. Batchly a large bunch of tulips. She could not recall the last occasion when a man had bought her flowers. Her thanks were almost inarticulate, almost a parody of the banal. But the exotic, the satin stiffness of petal and stem and leaf, weighted her hands. For ever afterwards Joe was to be *her* American.

He drank too much and talked too loudly. Within a short time of his arrival he was treating the house as if it was his own, and shocked Sarah profoundly when he suddenly remembered something and used the telephone without asking permission. But whether this was brash behaviour because he felt ill at ease or the natural expression of bad manners, Sarah liked him. Beneath it

all he seemed to be both sympathetic and simple—though he had dismissed Mrs. Batchly's flowers as "mere goon bait", he was obviously delighted by her pleasure.

She guessed that after dinner he would quickly come to the point of his visit. She had no intention of being taken for granted, not from pride but because at this moment such an act would be meaningless. Facially she found him attractive, but that was not enough. She wished for something more than sex, something which she felt he might have to offer but which would never come to light if he was quickly gratified. Probably there was nothing, she told herself, but at least it could not be less than at this particular moment. She stopped his attempted kiss with an indifference more insulting than anger.

"Gee, honey, why be that way? The pic was good, but you know I didn't come for pic."

"Of course, but you didn't expect me to say so, or did you?"

"Well, no. But what are we going to do, sit and talk?"

"I wouldn't mind. Actually I thought you could take me out."

"Yeah? I'm the sucker I suppose?" he asked petulantly.

His childishness angered Sarah for a moment. "You ought to be pleased," she answered hotly. "I don't have to wait for my housekeeper to be knocked down before I get asked out!"

At once he was contrite. "Don't get mad at me, I'm only fooling. I'd be proud to take you out; let's go."

He took her first to the bar of a big hotel and then on to a club packed with Americans. There was a small band, synthetically full of life, and slickly smart English girls danced in the American style as though to the manner born. But Joe did not want to dance. What had appeared dull in the quiet comfort of Sarah's lounge now seemed

an enjoyable way to pass the evening. He managed to find a small table as far from the band as possible and they talked for a long time.

Joe was quite happy that Sarah had, in effect, called his bluff. Lying on his bunk in the supply depot he would catalogue her charms endlessly to his neighbour.

"So you've got yourself a shack job at last, eh, Joe?"

"Well, it's no shack job yet," he answered, almost proudly, half wishing that he did not speak of Sarah in this fashion. "She's class, I'm telling you. She's different. Maybe that cute scar of hers gets me."

But at the end of a week he felt that he ought to try again, and so he brought her home earlier than usual one night. Sarah knew what he intended and was glad, for though she was not in love with him in a way that she might have come to love Roger, yet she did love him in a fashion. Through all his human complexities there was a sustaining strand of simplicity which, appearing and disappearing, touched everything with a curious purity: his scabrous anecdotes, the lying accounts, when half drunk, of his women and his family. Above all, this simplicity bred kindness, not the spurious kindness of desire, but a genuine wish that Sarah should be pleased.

And suddenly, in the sitting-room, he was nervous and humble. He seemed much younger and his voice lost all its stridency. They lay on the sofa and Sarah let him understand that if he wished he could stay all night. She expected (was half afraid) that he would want his satisfaction then and there, but instead he got up from the sofa and mixed himself a large whisky. When he sat down again she saw that his hand was unsteady. And then, falteringly at first, holding her hand limply in his, forgetting all his previous accounts, he began to tell her

about his childhood in Chicago. He smoked incessantly and drank more whisky than she ever remembered seeing him do before. He talked for nearly an hour, quietly but compulsively. She listened with patience, a little puzzled, a little bored, but not unmoved. The moment came when she could no longer stifle a yawn, and the thread of his thought parted slowly.

"I'm keeping you up, gee, I ought to be sorry."

"I am rather tired, and there's work tomorrow."

He stood up and held out his hand, shyly. "Will it be all right . . . do you mind?"

She smiled. "No, I don't mind." He put his arm about her, kissing her cheek.

They undressed in silence and he was the first into bed, still wearing his vest and undershorts. When she put out the light he moved closer to her, resting his hand on her waist. Sighing deeply once, he fell asleep. He was still asleep at eight o'clock when Sarah bathed. Then she told Mrs. Batchly to take him a tray of breakfast as soon as she had left for the office. She was embarrassed on this first occasion of openly admitting that someone had slept with her, and a little amused too that the night had been one of uninterrupted sleep. Mrs. Batchly was also embarrassed, but managed to behave as though it was a commonplace.

Sarah was dressing quietly when he awoke. He showed no trace of having had too much to drink, and, in spite of his opening remark, seemed happy. "You're not mad at me, are you?"

She sat on the edge of the bed. She too was happy this morning, curiously pleased that the night had been passed as it had.

"Not at all, Joe. It couldn't really matter less to me."

"You're a swell kid, Sarah, I guess I'm falling for you."

"No, don't do that!" She spoke quickly and stood up.

"Why not?"

"Because." She picked up her handbag from the dressing table. "It's too early to be serious, and I must rush. Come along at six tonight, earlier if you like. Mrs. B.'ll let you in."

That evening he repeated his question. She tried to explain her attitude but it was very difficult. She found herself reluctant to speak her most private thoughts, and even what she did say seemed a poor reflection of what was in her mind. And in a way it was the more difficult because she was not telling the whole truth. She was half ashamed to say that she did not want him to fall more in love than he already was because his deeper love would create a burden. She wanted love, but love measured out by herself, not some deluge beyond control and which she feared. For her it was its cold transience that gave their relationship warmth.

Joe's simplicity, his acceptance of her spoken word at its face value, prevented their conversation deteriorating into a confused argument. And what she said, what she told him about Robert, had its intended effect. Although it deepened his tenderness for her it also removed a possible source of discontent, stopping his quickly growing infatuation before it reached the stage where he would have resented even a dead rival.

That night they became lovers. In spite of all his talk he was not very experienced. There was a hesitancy only removed from sadness by his youth. But there was also a certain gentleness, a sentimentality, to which Sarah responded. Neither then nor on any other occasion with Joe did she reach her crisis. For her it became a

friendship to which an incommunicable flavour of intimacy was added.

And for Joe too, although he would never have admitted it, the physical aspect of their relationship was only of secondary importance. Now he had a home to go to; could be seen in Sarah's company; was envied greatly by his friends. He began to invite these friends to the house, but in spite of the proprietorial air which he could not help adopting (as though all this existed only because of him) he was careful to ask her permission. She was amused by the way he did this, as though asking a favour of a stern and unpredictable mother whose place would be taken, once the guests arrived, by an indulgent and loving wife. But if Joe expected to be indulged, that was for himself alone. His friends were allowed to take no liberties apart from the conventional lewdness of speech. They brought their own drink, and behaved as though he and Sarah were in fact married.

She encouraged the visits of these friends, enlisted men. It had become increasingly difficult to find topics of conversation with Joe that had not already been exhaustively discussed—films and his family and army life. His friends became the framework of the time they spent alone, and she was genuinely interested in their foreign-ness. Their talk and outlook, though largely limited to personalities, was more amusing and seemed more vital than the talk she would have expected from Englishmen. But although she was happy and relaxed she did not find the same atmosphere with these Americans that she had known at the beginning of the war. It was not only that they were foreigners to her, they in turn seemed touched with foreign-ness for each other.

Joe was able to sleep away from his depot most nights of

the week, and she enjoyed his company in bed although she was disturbed by the speed with which she lost all physical desire for him. Luckily he was not exigent, for Sarah quickly discovered that it was not easy for her to adopt the feminine role of simulating passion. But she found no difficulty in being affectionate, and with that Joe seemed satisfied.

The invasion of Normandy ended their affair rather than the departure of his unit a fortnight later. Sarah in particular was suddenly caught up in a wave of excitement which absorbed all her energy and temporarily dwarfed both her interest in the office and her much greater concern with her personal existence. And when he called at the office one afternoon to tell her, rather dramatically, that he was on forty-eight hours' notice to move, she was ashamed to find that her feeling was one of relief. In her own mind she was certain that she had hidden this elation from Joe, and to some extent she had. But in these matters a total deception is hardly possible, and he knew intuitively that when he left for France their affair would finish.

On his last evening he was given leave until nine o'clock and he came to say good-bye shortly after six. He had been drinking before he came, hoping that it would drive away the depression he feared and hated. But it had only deepened his mood.

"It's stupid being depressed, Joe. There's nothing you can do, and after all it's not for ever."

"Long enough to see you and me washed up, Sarah."

He was standing by the window, half turned from her, and she was chilled by the dead finality of his voice. She had expected him to be full of plans for their reunion, plans which she had feared as imposing obligations on her which she did not want to meet.

"Now why say that? I shall still be here when you come

back." But she knew that her voice held no sincerity, only relief that Joe would know and understand why she spoke hypocritically. And yet in that same moment she felt regret for this freedom. He turned and smiled.

"You'll be here O.K., but we'll be through. It's been fine all the way along, and there's no reason seemingly why it shouldn't be the same when I come back. But it won't be. I just know it. With a long break you'll be through. You don't love me, so it must happen that way."

"How do you know what I feel, Joe?"

"Dunno. Maybe I'm just high. Maybe you give me a feeling that you need someone around, anyone almost, as long as he doesn't grab the silver or knock the hell out of you. So you'll get another guy; it'll just happen. I guess you're a sucker for love, Sarah, like everyone else, only more so."

"Joe! Don't say that sort of thing, it's hot-making! You're just depressed and hung-over. We always agreed not to get involved, and what's the good of trying to make plans?"

"You're right, sweet." He left the window, trying to push aside the mood he hardly understood. But he was still lost and depressed, and craved for reassurance, though of what he did not know. "I've got to be back by nine, just to sit around and wait. Let's take the Scotch upstairs, it's kind of cosier there."

She expected that he would have a few more drinks and then want to make love for the last time. But he only took off his shoes and jacket, propping himself against the padded head of the bed while Sarah leant against him. And he began to behave in the same way as the first night he had stayed, holding her hand, drinking the whisky as though he were thirsty. But instead of talking about his family he spoke of everything they had done together,

about Mrs. Batchly and the house, the small jobs which he had said he would do and now would never do, but which still remained to be done. And he would hum the tunes he seemed to associate with her, Black Magic, Stairway to the Stars.

Outside the sun died in a bank of low clouds and the eastern sky was green-gold. As she listened, answering his occasional questions, she watched the poplar by the gate. The light breeze was visible in its turning leaves, and through its screen she could hear the sound of children, the more distant sound of river traffic. She began to drink from his glass, trying to stifle the ineffable sadness of saying good-bye to this human being. And as she drank, because she drank, she was thinking that Joe had repaid all the liberties he had taken by giving her the freedom of himself. He was humanity; she could put out her hand and touch his body anywhere and it would not occur to him to protest. She could walk into his mind, ask any question and if he knew the truth he would tell her; within reason she could ask him to do anything for her and he would do it. For these few weeks they had given freedom to each other to move at will in their hearts and minds. And that, for Sarah, was happiness. And if it left her still wanting something more, at least nothing else came within comparable distance of satisfying her.

She rested her head on his shoulder, trying to hold and keep for ever this sadness that was happiness. But once again (though Sarah did not remember) time poured from the travelling-clock on the dressing table. And then Joe looked at his wrist-watch and sighed.

Two days later Sarah came into the kitchen for breakfast humming a tune. Under any circumstances this

was rare indeed and Mrs. Batchly, who still found evidence of Joe all over the house, disapproved.

"Can't say you seem to be pining away, ma'am, with that nice boy scarcely cold, gone Lord knows where. Still, p'raps you'll 'ave regrets when 'is rations are gone too."

"What do you want me to do, go into mourning? He isn't even in any great danger."

"No, ducky, I wouldn't want that. But 'e *was* sweet!"

"I think you were fonder of him than me." Sarah smiled.

"I'm sure I was. 'E was more my class, in spite of 'is talk and cash. If only I'd 'ad 'is chances!" She sighed heavily for some unimaginable Eldorado she had created and called America. "You'll be lucky if they're all like that."

"You sound as though I'm going to have a regiment."

"Not a regiment, ducky, that's talking common. But I daresay you're going to 'ave as many as you want, and that reelly amounts to the same. You ought to try and stick to one, a nice steady, that's the best. But not much chance of that with a war on."

"And I don't want a 'nice steady' either."

"Yes, ducky, I know. But you're only living in a fool's paradise about Mr. Robert. Still, in a way you're right, I'd do the same. Let's 'ope the war's over soon and you can get off and 'ave a good look."

(VIII)

Sarah's private life, though containing so much of the significant expression of herself, only occupied a small proportion of the time taken up by the work of the office, visiting warehouses, factories, ministries, either with her

father or Emmanuel. She never had regarded and never would regard this work as other than a second best substitute for her life as a woman (now identified as her life with Robert), but even so she was aware of its advantages as a means of passing time, and there was a satisfaction to be found in efficiency, in the discipline of keeping regular hours. And she derived a certain cynical amusement that so much of her efficiency sprang from the fact that she did not really care, which leant to her dealings with both officials and clients a flamboyant air of success.

Through Joe Sarah had met many Americans and now she spent most of her spare time in their company. They supplied what she was looking for, a sensory form of companionship; they were sexual and affectionate, often sentimental, but provided she was careful there was little risk of long entanglements. For some months after Joe she had a succession of brief affairs and was content—sufficiently content not to squander it in a futile orgy of drink and late nights which would turn the following day into a burden somehow to be endured. She expected that her present friends would resent this temperate behaviour, but she was wrong. For most of them there was an added attraction that she should work and possess what appeared to be a full life irrespective of their existence. Because she was independent they valued her more highly, because she was rich they were prepared to spend much more on useless luxuries. It was this material respect as well as their own attitude toward women which enabled Sarah to dominate them and stop the terrible scenes of jealousy to which they were so prone.

Under conditions other than war this pattern of behaviour would not have been possible. But the times fitted exactly her own fear of becoming involved, and she was quickly able to inhibit herself against sleeping with

men who were liable to remain long in London. This inhibition slowly spread to those men who showed a strong tendency to become possessive, and any display of jealousy aroused in her an anger increasingly difficult to control.

By Christmas of 1944, which Sarah spent with her father, other changes were gradually taking place. She had always been attracted by a certain type of physical appearance, of which Robert was the epitome, and increasingly she would only sleep with men who conformed to this pattern. As the stress fell more and more on externals she became less and less capable of judging character: anyone who attracted her was almost certainly good, the others were probably bad.

This increasing reliance on appearance came about as inevitably as an increasing and indecent curiosity was beginning to take hold of her mind. Although she knew that men's bodies differed one from another in a most pronounced way (even throats being as individual as fingerprints), in the past, once in love, the body had ceased to matter. Even in the case of Joe, with whom she had scarcely been in love, this had been so and she had not minded that he was too white, too hairy, that in the morning his breath was bad and his smell faintly feral. Until now her urge for physical love had been strong enough to remove curiosity; had been an end in itself. Now she was expecting her body to surrender in the same oblivious fashion and when it refused, partly through satiation and partly because she was not in love, her mind attempted the stimulation of curiosity. She would find herself looking at some man and wondering whether he was circumcised, wondering how he would act in bed. Often to sleep with a man once was enough.

She was beginning to decide that sex was boring; but it was still not so boring as to have none.

Perhaps the next one, or the one after, would be better.

(IX)

At the beginning of 1945 Sarah was officially notified that Robert was now to be posted as missing, presumed killed. She phoned Maurice and asked him to find out whether anything new had come to light, but he told her that the notification was merely routine. Even so she was depressed, acutely aware of the long time that had passed and that hope was dwindling. Miguel had been sending vague reports and now she wrote again to him, urgently, but his more positive reply was too meretricious to be other than depressing. And the war, too, that should have been finished last autumn, dragged on and on. The effort of will necessary to keep her love for Robert unimpaired and shut off from her daily life was harder than ever before.

But the death of her father at the beginning of February wiped all this from her mind. He had been away from the office for two days with a not very severe cold and neither his doctor nor Sarah were worried. She had spoken to him on the phone twice a day, and on Wednesday had suggested coming down to keep him company. Partly because he was feeling very weak and wanted to avoid worrying her he said that it was unnecessary and he would expect her as usual on Friday evening. In the early hours of Thursday his heart failed, and Sarah was phoned by a distraught Mrs. Logan as she was having breakfast.

She had always loved her father but it needed his death

to show her the place he had occupied in her life, one that now seemed all the greater because he had never made open demands for her love. Ever since the news of Robert she had felt an increased tenderness for her father, which had become the more strong recently as her attitude began to harden toward both friends and lovers. As she listened to Mrs. Logan a pus of loneliness broke inside her and she was crying silently as she put down the receiver.

It was Emmanuel who arranged for the funeral to take place on Saturday and who went with her on Thursday to Sevenoaks. His presence was a comfort and his grief lessened hers. But he was returning after the funeral and Sarah did not think she could bear to stay in the house over the week-end. He had suggested her coming to Golders Green, but in spite of her sense of loss and loneliness her habits of independence were becoming so ingrained that she could not tolerate the thought of disciplining herself to the sort of régime under which she imagined Emmanuel lived. And the effort to behave conventionally with her mind full of her own grief appeared too great.

She returned to London in time for tea. She was afraid Mrs. Batchly would ask such questions as the number of wreaths, and did not want to indulge this curiosity. But Mrs. Batchly had lit a fire in the sitting-room and brought tea there, asking no questions at all. This shamed Sarah and later on, having poured out a large sherry, she wandered into the kitchen.

To begin with, it was a relief to tell her about the funeral, the unexpected people who had come and the expected ones who had not. She had more sherry and for a short while felt almost normal. By half-past six there was nothing more to say; already she had padded out time with

reminiscence, and this had brought back her loneliness and the alcohol had made her restless.

"Why don't you go to the pictures, ducky? No one will know. Don't see that it matters, m'self. A lot of nonsense; *they* don't care, you can be sure of that," she said, pointing upwards.

"Well, I really think I might. Don't bother about supper, I'll eat out."

She walked to the King's Road and on an impulse took a bus rather than a taxi. She got off at Piccadilly Circus and began to wander round the cinemas trying to make up her mind what to see, but neither musicals, nor gangsters, nor a British comedy held any appeal. She walked round Leicester Square and back towards the Circus, feeling the slow burn of isolation as she was jostled by the talking crowd. Suddenly she was afraid that she would cry again, and aware that if she did her tears would be nothing more than self-pity. She pushed aside her mood, contemptuous of her own weakness: tears were futile. And life was futile too, but just one degree better than death, that pointless nothing. At least while one lived there were momentary flashes. She tried to smile, telling herself that such thoughts were as childish as tears. And at least her body was not betraying her, *that* went on remorselessly living, and it was hungry.

She lingered over her meal, but in spite of the long day and almost a bottle of wine it still seemed much too early to go home. She decided to visit a news theatre for an hour; and although it was very crowded she managed to find a seat at the back. As she sat down the man next to her turned his head. He was tall; he pushed himself as far back in his seat as possible and moved his knee towards her.

She could feel his knee press against her very gently. For a moment she was exasperated, but the wine had produced

a fatalistic indifference: wherever she had gone that evening she would have expected to be accosted in some way or other. There was nothing he could do unless she responded, and she moved her own knee farther away. For the man this action was a mere formality, he could feel excitement as gradually he eased up his greatcoat and edged his thigh and leg once more towards her. She did not move away immediately; she was already nearly touching the man on her left, and just this amount of human contact was not unpleasant.

She expected that now he would begin to slide his hand towards her under the cover of his coat, and at the first touch of fingers she would leave. But the soldier did nothing further. Although he watched the screen he no longer saw it, conscious only of the warmth that weighted his body. Sometimes he moved his head fractionally as he tapped his ash into the piled tray between them, glancing at her profile. Desire was checked by fear that he might go too far and she would leave. Better to stay like this and make believe.

He waited until she left and then followed. When they were clear of the queue he drew level and smiled. "Like a drink? There's a nice pub round the corner." In spite of the black-out he sensed that she was what he would call a 'lady', and he was hesitant.

"You're wasting your time, I'm afraid. I'm going home." But she smiled, glad that he had spoken, that for a moment her aloneness was not absolute.

"I don't think I'm wasting my time, 'long as I'm talking with you." The heavy gallantry passed unnoticed. In the sick darkness of the black-out his coarse good looks were redeemed by youth, his Durham accent as foreign and far away as Texas

"All right. For half an hour, but that's all. And then

I'm going home alone. I mean that, so if you want to change your mind do it now."

"Suits me O.K.," he answered with a broad smile, certain that she was merely saving face. "My name's Sid, what's yours?"

Two hours later Sarah was pressed back in the corner of a cab, feeling his wet mouth jolt on hers. Her anger against herself was now directed against his clumsy and ludicrous position, half kneeling on the floor of the cab, one thigh pressed painfully against her. But anger was a stupidity, a remembering; she turned it into a lust and triumph. She could still remember the moment in time when she had elected to do what she knew was evil—yet was it evil? Who cared anyway; no one, least of all her father. And this man's innocence would absolve her guilt (except she felt no guilt), this was man only living life and through him she would be dragged out of herself by the violence and release not of surrender, but participation. Half drunk, she hoped for the forgetfulness of pain, of bitten flesh, of slippery and intertwined mouths and grotesque indecencies, her mind polymorphously perverted, full of the lust of her suddenly remembered dreams. And with it a strange delight and mockery.

She stopped the taxi some distance from the house and they tiptoed to the front door. She left him in the dark hall and crept to the head of the stairs. But no light showed under Mrs. Batchly's door. Step by step she felt her way down again, to the slow pump of her heart, half smiling (humourlessly) in the blackness, delaying the awaited touch of hands; as she reached the bottom step his hands groped for her. He strained her against himself, rubbing her whole body against his own, licking her mouth with his tongue. She managed to quieten him, leading him

into the black sitting-room, shutting the door. Their hand hardly knew whether to take off the barrier of clothes or immediately to search out each other's nakedness. And then, sometimes inseparable and sometimes apart, in complete silence save for the sound of breathing and the noise of moving flesh, they surrendered themselves to the grotesqueries that only humans understand.

In the morning when she awoke, late and alone, Sarah made no attempt to exonerate herself in any way; it had happened and she had enjoyed it. Her only regret was that now she felt jaded from lack of sleep, with having drunk too much, with the nervous expense of body which (unknown to her) darkly shadowed her spirit. But to fill some of her depression she had only to return in her imagination to the previous evening, nor was this difficult, for last night she had done things which she had never before imagined, things which she knew she could never speak of to another person. She wondered if anyone else had ever behaved in such a fashion, and on the night of their father's funeral. But the question was no sooner asked than answered affirmatively. Almost everyone, she thought, held some secret which they considered so bad as to be unshareable, though to others it might appear laughably trite. And this comforted her; if all were guilty everyone was innocent. She did not think of saints for she had never met one, and neither, as far as she knew, had anyone else. If she had ever thought about it she would have supposed canonisation to be as much a part of religious propaganda as the newspaper story that all Allied soldiers were heroes. Life was one thing; what religion and the newspapers said was something else again.

Mrs. Batchly usually went to Batterssea on Sunday. She suggested that perhaps today Sarah would prefer her not to go. But now Sarah wanted to be alone.

Half an hour after Mrs. Batchly had left the house the door-bell rang. She put on her dressing-gown and walked downstairs, afraid that it might be someone calling to condole. She was still thinking of an excuse to send them away as she slowly opened the front door, and there was the soldier of the previous night. Momentarily she almost blushed, by daylight his coarse appearance offended her. Then she was glad. They smiled, and without a word he came into the house and she shut the door. She began to walk up the stairs and when she was only half-way up he stopped her. She turned and faced him, her conspirator. They still smiled their broad humourless smile, and she watched his hands avidly as they moved swiftly down his clothes.

Mrs. Batchly would not return until late that evening. They stayed in the house all day: sometimes in the bedroom, sometimes in the lounge. Three times the phone rang but Sarah did not answer. At seven o'clock they went to a restaurant.

She recalled vaguely that the night before he had said he would travel north on Sunday morning to see his mother. She was afraid that he might change his mind again and come tomorrow. She did not want Mrs. Batchly to see him.

"What time's your train? You know it's impossible for me to see you tomorrow."

"Don't worry, I'm reporting back to my unit at Epsom by midnight."

"What about your mother?"

"She's dead, years ago. I've got a cow of a wife at Keswick, but I haven't been near her this leave."

"Why bother to lie?"

"I thought you might not fancy me if I was married. Lots of women don't."

"Why didn't you go home?"

"I'm sick tired of Jennie. I've 'ad her every way I know and she's lousy in all of them. Says it's dirty, she's a fine one to talk about dirt. Don't worry, Sal, I won't come back and slip the 'ousekeeper a length instead."

Sarah shrugged. She hated the diminutive of her name, but it was the unexpected coarseness of the remarks that lined her mouth with distaste. In the house he had said nothing comparable to this. But, after today, she did not expect to be spared.

"I don't really care if you do. It's only that I don't like her knowing *all* my private life."

He leant across the table. "I'm only joking, kid. I like you, we're the same, know what we want and don't waste time talking ourselves into it. You were a bit gabby when we met, just part of the game, I suppose. How'd you like a bit right now, eh, right where you sit? You'd only have to slide your arse forward a bit, I'm good at eating refined, with just a fork . . ." His voice was husky and low, but there was no response left in Sarah, all she wished was to be rid of him. They said good-bye in Shaftesbury Avenue and she hardly listened to his protestations that on his next leave he would phone her. She hoped never to see him again.

In the taxi going home she wondered if by this time tomorrow she might have changed her mind.

She did not change her mind because temporarily she forgot him. There was so much to attend to at the office, so many questions arising from her father's death, the

sudden weight of becoming an extremely rich woman. And as these matters were dealt with she was slowly caught up again by her circle of Americans.

It was now that her behaviour began to cause comment. She was less fastidious and more inconstant, and entered on a phase of extravagant sexuality that shocked a number of her lovers. She was also drinking more, finding that it both encouraged her in this behaviour and excused it.

This was not a sudden change. Among the people with whom she had always mixed, drink was an accepted convention. For Sarah it was also the line of least resistance and the immediate and obvious advantages far outweighed its disadvantages. From a purely physical point of view she found it difficult to drink to excess, for her stomach revolted before she reached drunkenness, and so she did not suffer in the usual spectacular fashion, hardly connecting the grey flatness of her mornings as a form of payment for previous elation. She believed, too, that drink made her more sympathetic and interested in other people; she did not understand that her apparent interest was only to find out whether their experiences of life in any way mirrored and threw light on her own.

She understood that drink led to promiscuity; she did not realise promiscuity led to drink. As time passed even the brief minutes of basic sexual pleasure were becoming meaningless, and unknowingly each evening she substituted drink in an attempt to find that semblance of release from herself which she had not found since the night of her father's funeral.

But Sarah was not worried, for the end of the war would end her promiscuity as well.

She was surprised that this event made no difference to her way of life, apart from a week of particularly heavy

celebrations. She was even more surprised to find she was relieved that this was so, and she came to understand that secretly she dreaded the loneliness, the possible eventual void, that seemed inherent in her search. She never considered abandoning it, for the remembrance of her life with Robert still represented a supreme happiness. But at the same time (though she hid this fact from herself) she was content to be forbidden to commence.

(X)

Michael returned to England two months after the end of the war. Out of loyalty to Robert, not from guilt, she behaved discreetly during his leave in London. This was not difficult, for seeing Michael again recalled Robert with a poignant sweetness that made her infidelities seem unimportant.

Michael was very satisfied to find Sarah so sympathetic to his return, and he made the mistake of imagining that she had been waiting impatiently for this to happen. He had no idea that essentially he only existed for her because of his power to evoke Robert. Her pleasure confirmed his belief that he would not only find employment with Valmont & Son but eventually he would marry Sarah.

When the idea of marrying Sarah had first come to him, shortly after Robert was missing, he had remembered with surprise that legally he was not free to do this. He had waited some months and then written to Mary, saying that after much consideration he was convinced their marriage had failed irretrievably and suggested that on his return she should divorce him. He was relieved but also piqued by her quick acceptance, and gradually adapted the story so that it became Mary who had tired of him. But he did not press any sort of suit with Sarah, preferring to let

time pass and find out at first hand whether she had yet accepted the fact of Robert's death.

Nor did he do more on his leave than be as attentive and charming as possible. He wanted first to be employed by Sarah, and there were some months yet before his demobilisation, months which he looked on as a bridge between the enchantment of his war and the dreariness of being a civilian. Before he left London to report for duty in the north of England he had achieved the first part of his plan. He had been surprised by the business-like way Sarah had agreed to this, speaking of his possible dismissal in the same tone as she used for his employment. But he was not worried; he had always made himself indispensable to his superior officers and intended to become indispensable to Sarah.

He was quite confident that it was only a matter of time before Sarah came to love him. He was well aware that if she had been poor he would have had no interest in her, not even of lukewarm friendship. But whether he was marrying Sarah or marrying the woman Robert had so passionately loved, he did not know. He did not want to know.

(XI)

With the collapse of Germany Sarah applied again to the Foreign Office, and again with the defeat of Japan. But it was not until the middle of December that she finally received permission to apply to the Spanish authorities for the necessary visa.

When she did this she made the mistake of giving the name of Miguel Telon as a reference. Unknown to her his brother had been imprisoned after the Civil War as a Communist, and although he had long since been released

the police in Barcelona now began a routine check on Miguel's activities. It was the middle of April before her visa was finally granted.

The visa was valid for three months from the date of entry into Spain, and Sarah had arranged to stay with Edmee before crossing the border at Port Bou. She was impatient to see Edmee again, but her feelings were not unmingled. The years before the war now seemed incredibly remote, dead and pointless and out of fashion, and in a way both Edmee and herself were touched by this decay. She hated to think that this was so, and Edmee, the last of her pre-war friends except for Michael, would reassure her.

But these thoughts were forgotten once she was caught up in the journey itself. As the plane crossed the coast of France she felt a sudden emotion, a mingling of excitement and peace, and remembered love for Robert stirred in her throat and flowed beneath her skin. She had dreaded Le Bourget and its associations, but now she was impervious to pain and walked past the doors of the lounge as though they were no more than doors and her drive to the Gare d'Austerlitz no more than a drive.

As the train drew into Perpignan, Sarah was anxious lest she should be unable to respond adequately to the excitement and affection she expected Edmee to pour forth. But she was so intent on hiding her surprise at the change in Edmee's appearance that she was unaware her own greeting was the more effusive. As they left Perpignan behind and were heading south and west, talk of her journey expended, Sarah said:

"You're looking wonderful, Edmee, much better than I ever remember." At first she had been shocked by the way Edmee had aged; now she was not so sure. Her soft white arms and hands were weathered, thin and stringy with

muscle; the coarsened skin was repeated at her throat and face, emphasised by her iron-grey hair cut *en brosse*.

"Yes? You don't think my peasant disguise too *outré*?"

"It doesn't look like disguise to me. And no make-up, hardly. What happened to the salad bowl?"

Edmee laughed. "I bring it out occasionally. But not many people come except on business, and round here *maquillage* increases the price of what I buy and lowers it for what I sell. But I haven't forgotten and tonight, unless you are too tired, it will be fun to dress up again. It's good for the servants, once in a while. Why don't you say what you mean, that I look years older?"

"I did think that at first, but I don't now. I mean you do, but it suits you wonderfully. Have I changed a lot?" She smiled, expecting Edmee to praise her as before.

"Yes, a lot. But you are still beautiful." Something in her voice told Sarah that Edmee had been more shocked than herself by the changes that had taken place in seven years; it made the past seem even more remote. She said nothing, watching without interest glimpses of the Pyrenees seen through the hilly countryside. Then Edmee pointed across a shallow valley to a long low house of honey-coloured stone set in a green sea of vineyards. "Meretagnan," she said, and Sarah made a polite remark. They did not speak again until the car passed through bleached and sagging gates, across a wide yard littered with straw and geese, hens and farm implements. "This is the back," Edmee said, "the front is more elegant but less convenient."

It was not until the evening that Sarah relaxed, as they ate asparagus, a roast duckling with a heaped salad tangy with local oil, touched with garlic and lightened with orange. They drank a heavy golden wine from Edmee's vineyards. The long windows of the dining-room were

open, the curtains undrawn, and the gleam of candlelight on silver was repeated in the dark cypresses in the garden, silvered by a small moon that could throw no shadow.

"You like this, Sarah?" Edmee gestured to embrace the food and the house, the garden and the hilly countryside. The note of genuine curiosity prevented her question from being complacent.

"Yes, of course. It's wonderful." But the surprise in her voice told Edmee that she had not understood the question. "You were lucky to have this to come to."

"Lucky! Yes, it was incredible. The number of times I nearly threw the place away before the war. And for nothing! You know, in a way I have you to thank for all this, or rather Robert. I remember the first time we all had dinner together Robert talked to me and somehow we spoke of this place. To begin with I was quite indifferent. Then he began to ask questions about the hills in autumn, something to do with those smelly birds (hoopoes, I think you call them) and when they migrated. Of course I couldn't remember that, but suddenly I remembered so much else. Poor Robert! How he must have regretted starting my tongue when all he wanted to do was watch you." She paused. "And at that time although I was happy for you I was sad as well, thinking I should lose you. It's stupid and sentimental, but now I think Robert took you and gave me Meretagnan in return. Of course I forgot the conversation, but it never occurred to me again to sell."

"Really, darling! Not even I claim miracles for Robert "

Edmee looked at her, her face brooding and hesitant. She checked what she was about to say. "No, I go too far. But still. . . . When the war came I found myself recalling all this more and more, dreaming about it sometimes. Then one day, long before the offensive, I

packed everything I could and I was here. Not from fear, but necessity."

"Will you ever go back and live in Paris?"

"Only for visits. In a way I have corrupted myself. I regret that, and yet I don't. I shall always need more than this can give, the dirty feeling of big cities and mixing with one's own set. I work hard and I'm happy, but sometimes it sickens me and I long to lie in bed and feel jaded, have you sitting there reading stupidities from a newspaper. I wish I was like old Adèle, who goes to Perpignan three or four times a year with as much nervous upset as on her wedding night. And yet I don't wish to be like Adèle. I don't think she ever knew that this place is her *raison d'être*; I have all the delight of remembering. That is why I did a great deal for the Resistance, though God knows they sometimes made me sick. If I had stayed in Paris, nothing."

She pushed cigarettes towards Sarah, half turning her chair so that she too faced the open windows. "I had already been in the Resistance a long time when I heard about Robert. By then I was becoming afraid. I had passed too many men into Spain, had been seen too often talking to unlikely men in Cerbère and Bagnols. And then I wasn't afraid any more. Within three months I knew the shape of every bit of seaweed washed up between here and Toulon. You . . . you would hardly believe what the sea gives up. I must have seen them all. I swear Robert wasn't one of them, because at that time I swear I was *clairvoyante*. And I did what I could in Spain, but it was very difficult, not only politically. The sea gives up its dead the same there as here, but on the Costa Brava it gives them up to rocks. I bored our principal agents, asking always for news of one man who after a time became of no importance. I cannot be optimistic for you, Sarah.

And it will be expensive. The war is over and errands of mercy are going up in price again. But perhaps Spain is different."

"That doesn't matter. I got one of those improbable-looking pieces of jewellery Daddy gave me as a wedding present through the Customs, pinned on an evening dress. I shall sell it in Barcelona. And you needn't worry I shall end up a wreck of despair. I can't genuinely make myself believe I shall find Robert. Yet sometimes, briefly, I do. All I know is that in a sort of superstitious way I *must* look."

"Then look well, Sarah, for if you don't find Robert in Spain you'll find him nowhere."

She stayed at Merctagnan until the beginning of May, and as the uneventful days passed, her life in London seemed to drop away, thickly obscured by the tiny details of a different way of life, by the unwonted exercise she took as she walked with Edmee round the farm and vineyards, by the yellow roses already full-blown on the southern wall of the house. When she left she promised to stay again on her return from Spain.

Sarah already owed Miguel a considerable sum of money, and in spite of her smuggled jewellery she was afraid that her search might be crippled for lack of money. Miguel met her train and she told him to take her to a cheap hotel, and eventually they found a small *pension* in a narrow street off the Ramblas. It was evening and they arranged to meet in two hours' time for dinner. As she unpacked in the dingy room and experienced for the first time the smell of Spanish drains she was suddenly depressed and unaccountably afraid. She decided she did

not like Miguel, short and fleshy and over-gallant. She thought of Meretagnan with longing; that, and the strident roar from the canyon-like street, was her only comfort.

Her first unfavourable impression of Miguel rapidly grew. He spoke excellent French but insisted on speaking execrable English, and his volubility exhausted her. In his reports he had made out he was *persona grata* with the police, but although on their first visit to the headquarters of the Guardia Civil Sarah could not understand the flow of Spanish she did understand very well that for some reason he was regarded with contempt. But of greater importance was the sudden evaporation of the three most hopeful reports which he had sent. He evaded any discussion for as long as possible and then assured her that thorough investigation had proved them valueless.

Sarah had planned to take him with her to Valencia, and then to work her way up the coast. But on the third day she decided that apart from her personal dislike, which was unimportant, he himself was useless. Before she could pay him off she went to one of the large hotels and arranged with the elderly head porter for the sale of her brooch, knowing that such men usually only reach their position after years of scrupulous honesty. This man's face was stamped with a compassionate dignity, as though all the world was a harassed traveller.

"You are very trusting, señora." He smiled as he slipped the little box into his pocket, and then reached for a sheet of hotel paper. "Please allow me two days to arrange this matter. I will give you my receipt, but be careful not to lose it, or I might lose much more."

"I don't want a receipt, I can trust you."

"Now. But unless I give you this you will wake up in the middle of tonight and be unable to go to sleep again. That would be unhappy." He smiled, ironically and yet

with warmth. He had signed his name with a clear flourish, Antonio Valls. By the time she returned for the money she had decided to tell him the reason for her visit to Spain, and to ask him if he could arrange quickly for a car and a reliable driver who could speak either French or English. Valls assured her that he knew the very person.

Two days later, having finished with Miguel, Sarah left by car with Vicente driving. He was very young, and Sarah was afraid that his good looks might encourage him to believe that he could become her lover. She knew that only a month ago she would probably not have objected, but now such thoughts were actively unpleasant, washed from her mind by her stay with Edmee and by her closeness to Robert.

But during the long two days of driving Vicente hardly spoke except to answer questions. And once, when she inadvertently touched his hand, he drew away quickly. For Vicente was homosexual, and Valls had smiled the same warm ironical smile as he thought that not only would Vicente leave the beautiful señora alone, he would probably take an interest in the search.

Vicente was twenty-two years old, the eldest of five children. His father was dead, and he lived in a tenement flat on the north side of Barcelona with the rest of the family. Financially life now seemed easy, but for many years he and his mother had brought up the rest of the children in grinding poverty, lavishing on them all the love and meagre luxuries possible. Although this love was now returned to him, although his mother (so the neighbours said) indulged him shamefully even to the extent of allowing him a separate bed, Vicente was consumed with

loneliness and a fear that his family would discover what he regarded as a shameful secret. Had he wished he could have mixed with other homosexuals, but Barcelona is a small city as far as scandal is concerned, and fear of detection through association always held him back. His aversion for women was so great that he preferred to remain alone rather than to screen a secret association with a man by a public friendship with a woman. For the police, for public opinion, he cared little except that *their* knowledge would inevitably become his family's.

Only Valls and strangers knew his secret. Five years ago he had been spoken to in the Plaza Catalunya by a rich young American visiting from Madrid. It was six o'clock in the evening and the American, thinking that at that hour no one would be suspicious, took him back to his hotel. Valls noticed Vicente's frozen face and shabby clothes, saw the American's attempt at nonchalance as they crossed the foyer, and knew everything. He hoped very much that Vicente would not be stupid and only ask for a hundred pesetas; the American would pay a thousand without question. Of course it was disgraceful, but it went on all the time and he would deal with it tactfully in his own way. The fact that it was so early and the boy so shabby almost certainly meant that he would soon come down, and usually it was only Englishmen who bothered to come down too and see them safely through the foyer.

An hour later he called to Vicente: "Good evening, señor. Can I help you?"

Vicente turned quickly, blushing and afraid. He came close to the desk, looking at Valls's severe face. "Oh, no. I . . . I . . . have visited a friend staying here. I'm leaving now, at once."

"May I ask his surname, señor?" There was silence. "You must not come back to this hotel again." He looked

at the boy's face, white with shame and terror, and suddenly Valls tasted the unbearable sweetness of pity on his tongue. He did not smile but his face softened, his voice was comforting. "Don't be afraid. Go now, I hope he gave you a good present." For a moment Vicente did not understand, and then Valls thought that he would strike him.

"Never! You whore's son. I . . ."

His pride seemed to Valls the most pitiable thing of all. "Shut up, kid." But there was apology in his voice and a subtle appeal to Vicente to behave like a man. Vicente lowered his eyes. "Here, go and get yourself a meal, and when the time comes, if it comes, that you feel you want to speak to someone I shall still be here. It must be very difficult . . . in Barcelona. I am married and have no interest in men." He said no more and Vicente hurried away, the twenty-five peseta note warm in his hand. He used the memory of Valls as a talisman and a year later he returned to the hotel and invited him to eat. It became his only friendship, but even so he could never bring himself to speak of homosexuality. It was sufficient that Valls knew and still liked him.

On Valls's insistence Vicente had learnt good French, and through his influence had obtained work with a firm that was once more beginning to cater for tourists wishing to drive out to Montserrat.

Sarah had told Vicente of her plans during the two-days' drive, and when they arrived in Valencia she showed him Robert's photographs. He held them in his hands for a long time, trying to memorise every feature, his head turned a little away from Sarah, afraid that she might read in his face what he felt with all his being. Many emotions chased through his mind as Sarah watched

his intense regard, and when reluctantly he put the last photograph back on the table he smiled at her. It was the first time in his life that he had ever been able to smile with genuine affection at a woman who was not a member of his family, the first time that he was no longer repelled and afraid.

Valls had chosen even better than he knew. Robert's face haunted the lonely and romantic Vicente, the more passionately romantic because all the love he knew was the terror-ridden yet overwhelming eroticism of wine-laden breath in black alleyways, the fantastic yet momentary intimacy of hands wet with the semen of the unknown, the whispered "*Adios*". (Vicente's *adios* became his last link with his religion.) And now he brought a thoroughness to the search which would have been beyond Sarah's powers of physical endurance, and his inborn knowledge of his countrymen's mentality gave him a patience which he managed to instil in Sarah.

Even so it was difficult enough for her to accept the disregard for time which was almost oriental, to sit maybe for hours at some fly-thick café table waiting for a fisherman who had found a body, a Guardia Civil who had searched it. It was only her immediate recognition that Vicente was doing everything he could, far more in fact than he need, which kept her exasperation in check. If this stranger could bring to bear such single-mindedness she should be capable too.

And always there was Vicente to pass away the time, to teach her the card games played in the cafés, to explain the rigid social etiquette of these fishing villages and small towns, who (remembering Valls) privately sealed his growing affection by insisting that she learn Spanish. And in other ways, largely unknown to her, his constant presence

was essential. Here in the south for a woman like Sarah to travel without an escort was to mark her a whore; even so, everyone was convinced that Vicente was her lover, but that was sufficient to prevent them doing more than gaze avidly at her foreign and to them exotic beauty. Unknowingly Vicente had slipped into a dual role, the searcher and the searched; it gave him a proprietorial air which could quickly flare into a blaze of courage. No one attempted more than looks.

And to his handling of the countless officials he brought a natural charm and sensitivity, knowing intuitively how to obtain the utmost co-operation by flattery or deference in the rare cases when some official was unfriendly. Often this same sensitivity had to be used to determine how much was said out of mistaken pity, for the combination of her story and her appearance dangerously inflamed the Spaniards.

It took them until the end of June to work along the coast to Barcelona, and though the weeks had been fruitless and exhausting, Sarah was strangely happy. She had no regrets for spending so much time on the least likely half of her search, for she had learnt not only to adapt herself to such things as the disrupted meal times, the strange food, the sacred siesta of officials and the turning of night into their working day by the fishermen, but also she and Vicente had learnt the quickest way of extracting information from the Guardia Civil. To walk into a police station in some remote village and to begin asking questions about the death of some foreigner tended to produce an immediate disavowal of any knowledge, and once the disavowal was made it was difficult to retract. It was better to visit some café or the harbour first, to sit and wait for the inevitable curious ones to loiter up and talk. From them it was easy to obtain information which

would prevent the police asserting that no bodies had ever been washed ashore in this *pueblo*, and as often as not their descriptions were far more vivid than the official laconic record. Sarah had worked hard at her Spanish and was able to take a limited part in these conversations. This ability made her feel that she would be able to search the most important area even more thoroughly. And, like a gambler, repeated failure only convinced her that her luck would change.

During this time she was aware of a tranquillity, but she did not know that she was at peace because she was satisfying some fundamental need in her search for Robert, and that this gave point to every minute of every day, even when the surface of her mind was wholly exasperated.

This calmness, this acceptance, unclouded her, leaving her (insensibly) sensitive. And in this mood she received the land through which they passed. There were long hours spent in the crawling, lurching car as Vicente negotiated the appalling tracks which passed for roads along the coast itself. Day after day as she sat in the open car sunlight and blue water dropped into her mind, mountains and scorched hills advanced and receded in shades of indigo and palest lavender, sweeps of white beach glowed as colour ebbed and flowed throughout the day. Orchards of olive-green, thin-shadowed, changed to black-shadowed groves of oranges, glabrous-leaved. And the black cypresses threw fingers of time over baking rock and green cactus.

She had seen it all before, from the windows of trains in Italy, along short stretches of coast in the south of France. Of course it was beautiful, one took that for granted. But never before had she spent so long a period at such close quarters with this form of beauty, nor had her mind ever been so unclouded and receptive. And it was a beauty

which did not pall because each day it was subtly renewed as the car crawled from village to village. The indistinguishable olive trees were never duplicated, the same cascades of clove carnations fell from the same balconies uniquely, the mountains were more fluid in shape and colour than the sea. And though for most of the time her mind was far away, overlaid with the hypnotic regularly irregular lurching car, noise, heat, smell, dust—superficially bored, held in a filmy bubble of a past disaster, yet she could not escape entirely from the slow rain of beauty.

This time in Barcelona she stayed at the hotel where Valls worked. He looked up to see Sarah and Vicente cross the foyer towards him. From Vicente's bearing Valls's immediate reaction was that he had become her lover. During the last five years he had watched the gradual acquisition by Vicente of an attitude which to a casual observer was hard and arrogant. But Valls understood that beneath this he was ceaselessly conscious of the people around him, afraid that without the stiff mask would come detection, equally afraid that unless he ceaselessly looked he would never find what he had never known. Now that was gone, nor did he glance around him as he crossed the foyer.

At this stage Sarah turned to the British Consulate for assistance. She renewed her visa and with their help was given access to the harsh sadness of dossiers. In the small towns they had not seemed so harsh. Some nameless, usually faceless bundle of corruption, held together only by its rotting clothes, would be rolled on to the sands and someone would be compelled to undertake the last nauseating services. But when that was done, the record

made and time passed, the bundle slowly took on humanity again and even acquired a name, "*El Pobre*". Known or unknown, foreigners or Spaniards, they were all "*El Pobre*", and given a place with the rest of the slow stream of dead, no longer entirely homeless and alone. But in Barcelona their very numbers destroyed their chances of taking on a few shreds of humanity.

She stayed longer in Barcelona than she had intended, for Valls had unearthed some vague reports of shadowy figures, half fugitive, half imagined by his informers, of foreigners in hiding in 1943. But each trail petered out in the thickets of time, was blocked abruptly by the counter of some dark shop spread with beans and candles, was barred by the smoked glasses of a blind seller of lottery tickets. She and Vicente met the owners of trawlers who had found wreckage during the war, but they only met those who had reported such wreckage, and these reports she had already seen.

She left Barcelona and began again along the coast. As she neared the area where the storm had passed both she and Vicente redoubled their efforts. Here the roads between each coastal village were excellent compared with what had gone before, and the hours spent threading the maze of ruts and dust-filled potholes were now spent in the still more exhausting mazes of records and memories.

But there was nothing. As though in mockery the area on which her principal hopes were centred not only gave her nothing, it even refused to leave a loophole of escape for hope. The heat of August and the holiday crowds oppressed and jarred her. As the French border drew closer she felt a deepening depression which Vicente sensed and bent his will to oppose. They had long ceased the usual relationship of mistress and servant; he ate his meals with her, came to her bedroom early each morning

to pack her clothes and discuss their plans while she drank the bitter coffee. And by now (knowing he was disinterested but not the reason) Sarah would dress modestly in front of him. Though he never overcame a secret embarrassment he no longer felt aversion.

They spent their last day in Port Bou and Vicente wanted to stay the night and see Sarah on to her train. But for the past few days, deeply depressed and exhausted by four months of continuous travel, Sarah craved to be alone and rest. She knew where she wanted to go and its isolation reflected hers, she wanted no contact with the outside world, neither Vicente nor Edmee and least of all Emmanuel, with his weekly reports forwarded to her through the *Lista de Correos* at Barcelona. She told Vicente that she preferred to spend her last night alone in Spain, excusing herself on the grounds that it was a sentimental whim. It was the only excuse she could have made without hurting him.

When he came to say good-bye in the afternoon she tried to give him a large present of money, so large that for a moment Vicente thought she had made a mistake. He wanted to take it but he could not do so. He had become too fond of her; besides, she possessed something of far more value, a large portrait photograph of Robert. He asked for this and for her address in London.

As he drove to Barcelona he tried to make believe that he was Robert, or, even better, that he was himself and sitting next to Robert who was driving. He did not wish at all that he was Sarah. But of course it was all quite impossible, he told himself seriously. He would never find someone like Robert in Spain, it was staggering enough that he should have lived at all; to Vicente it was a happy thought that the world could produce (if only once in a lifetime) such a person as he imagined Robert must

have been. Without Robert nothing mattered except the process of life itself.

And so he would not look at the photo any more, he would keep it for a hundred years at the bottom of his locked tin trunk. And now he would go to Valls (who knew all Barcelona) and ask him to pick out a wife, some good and simple girl who would want children and not too much sex. He would have Robert's hidden likeness in the bedroom; and knowing that it would be there made the thought of sleeping with a girl seem almost pleasant.

(XII)

First it was necessary for Sarah to go by train to Gerona and hire another car, and from there she sent two telegrams, one to Emmanuel telling him to forward mail to Meretagnan, the other to Edmee saying that she would arrive in about a fortnight.

She headed for the coast and a village which by its setting had struck her as being the logical end of her search. It stood at the northern end of a symmetrical bay five miles wide, the southern arm a line of hills on which a small white town could distantly be seen. The northern arm was a towering cliff whose faded rose was repeated by four rock islands running out to sea. The village itself was squeezed between the escarpment and the beach. Inland were two soaring cliffs of the same rose-coloured stone, their lower slopes thick with pine trees, jumbled with huge rocks that showed above and through the trees and then swept up, sheer and naked, for the last hundreds of feet. These two cliffs looked across a broad triangle of plain whose base was formed by the sea and the sides by the long lines of hill, south and north, that ran back inland and met in blue perspective. There was only one road to

the village. No road led out or could lead out past the spear-point of swallow- and swift-haunted cliffs. The sea alone gave egress, and the four islands warned against even that. No other coast was visible, only the broad white bay within its arms of rock.

It was now the end of August and she knew that her chance of finding a room in the tiny hotel was negligible. Already she had had difficulty. But she was beyond the touch of practicality: something would turn up.

The hotel was full. She bought some food and a bottle of wine in the village and drove along a sandy track behind the wide beach. She spent the day lying in the sun, sleeping beneath the filmy shade of low tamarisks, swimming in the gentle water.

She had half decided to put up the hood of the car and spend the night there. But she had finished the food and was hungry again, the rough wine she had drunk, still unfinished, had made her thirsty, and as the sun was sinking the first mosquitoes appeared, so avid that they could be picked off her skin between finger and thumb. She drove slowly inland towards a small town, and when she had gone one mile she met Conrado.

He was standing guard in the middle of the narrow road while long-legged sheep shambled into the yard on the other side. His dog ran round the flock, too tired to bark.

Conrado turned to smile apology at the occupants. His smile changed at once when he saw a beautiful woman sitting alone in the car. Juanita would probably be watching from the house, it would be a good joke to speak to this woman and tease Juanita. Leaving Zerri to finish the work he walked to the side of the car, took off his cap and said good evening.

Sarah smiled and answered politely. His clothes were

coated with dust and his face streaked with dried sweat, the corner of his right eye inflamed with blood. His shirt was open to the navel and the hair on his chest and stomach was greyly black with dust. He smelt as she would have imagined he smelt. But his teeth were white, his blue eyes crowded with humour or the sun, his mouth was kind. And though his look was frankly appraising, after four months in Spain Sarah took no notice.

"Are you staying in the village?" he asked in Catalan. "Are you English?" And then he noticed the strained, almost wary look of incomprehension, the beginning of the apologetic smile. "*No entende Español?*"

"Yes. I understand some Castilian, but not Catalan. That's too difficult."

"Ah, good!" He repeated his first question and, because for him also Castilian was a foreign language which he spoke more slowly and with a bad accent, Sarah could understand.

"No, I want to stay but the hotel is full. So I go inland to the next town."

"That's a bad business! Too hot and too expensive. Can't you get a room anywhere, in a private house?"

"I would like to, but it's so difficult asking. My Spanish is very bad, and I know that round here many of the women speak only Catalan."

He assured her that she was more fluent than the Spaniards themselves, and then he saw Juanita loitering towards the gate. He decided to take the joke a little further and help this beautiful foreigner at the same time. It would be dark soon. It was outrageous that a woman should have to travel alone at night, even here, surely the safest place on earth. "Juanita!" he called, and then to Sarah: "My wife, very beautiful."

The girl came to the car smiling, pleased that tonight

she would be teased and at the end Conrado would undoubtedly make love to her; curious to look at this woman more closely, if only to be able to pick her to pieces with Conrado.

"Juanita, your aunt has an empty room," and he pointed down the road to a white-washed cottage that backed against the pine-hung escarpment.

When Sarah awoke in her vast but uncomfortable double bed she was amused and pleased by what had happened. Last night her immediate reaction had been a panic of refusal at the thought of sleeping in a cottage with filthy bedding and fleas and mosquitoes, at the knowledge that, even if she accepted, the arrangements would probably take half the night while she sat and smiled politely at some old crone confused into incoherence by such an event. She also suspected that this was just an attempt to produce a few pesetas for a member of his family. But the more she argued the more they protested, and in the end, possibly because Conrado's appearance seemed to reassure her, she had given way.

The outside of the cottage had been a clutter of sheds with corrugated asbestos roofs and boarded drunken doors. The air was ammoniac with the smell of pig and horse. But Juanita's aunt was strong, good-looking, still in her early forties, and the lines of humour at her eyes were more akin to Conrado than Juanita. To step inside the dark cottage through the swaying curtain of beads was to take part in some elaborate trick of conjury. It was, suddenly cool and fresh, the lower room seemed twice as large as the whole house. And when, instead of the smoky lamp she had expected, the electric light was turned on Sarah saw that everything was spotlessly, fanatically clean.

They climbed narrow brick stairs to a large landing

room. At first it seemed sombre with poverty, but there was a pedal sewing-machine in one corner and a radio on the sideboard. Her bedroom was dwarfed by the huge bed and a tallboy of chestnut, old and ugly but as enduring as the house itself.

Very quickly a potato and green pepper omelette filled her plate from rim to rim and, while she ate, the bedroom was made ready. When she pulled back the counterpane she saw that the sheets and pillow-cases were as fresh and clean as the rest of the house.

Now she lay in bed, listening to a mournful chicken and an occasional thud as the stabled horse pawed the straw. It was cool and the pine trees on the slopes above reflected green light through the faded green slats of the wooden blind. She was very rested and her mind was quiet, neither sad nor happy. Then, hearing sounds from below and wanting coffee without any hope of getting it, she went downstairs to find coffee ready.

It was difficult to understand Carmen's speech but easy to understand the eloquent signs telling her that she was going to work in the fields and that the house was Sarah's, presented in the shape of a massive key to the flimsy door. Carmen left and Sarah took her coffee and bread upstairs, listening to the scream of pigs being fed and the horse harnessed. And then silence; of sparrows and the slow cluck of hens, the faint clack of blinds in the breeze and the sigh of pines. She moved through the dreamy house, into the kitchen with its charcoal braziers and tinny oven, the corked stone jars of drinking water, the dark cupboard of a latrine. There were faded photos of Carmen as a bride, her father and grandfather as grooms.

Later on she bought food and returned to the same stretch of beach, bathing, lying in the sun, sleeping. She hardly thought of Robert at all as she lay pinned on the

white and quivering sand, drifting to the wash and murmur of the waves.

For a week she lazed on the beach or hired a small boat and visited more distant coves in search of solitude. Apart from the habitual morning and evening greetings with all and sundry she spoke to no one except Carmen, feigning a greater ignorance of Spanish than was the case. She saw Conrado twice as she returned at sunset and he led his sheep back from grazing. They would smile formally at each other. But at the end of that week, as familiarity had begun to blunt the sharp oblivion of sun and water, there came a day when in the afternoon clouds piled up inland and then spread slowly against the surface wind blowing from the sea.

It was strange, almost frightening, how the first white fringes of cloud (thickening and darkening toward the west) took colour from the land. The sea turned grey-green and the burning sand pale brown. Even the sound of the waves changed colour from translucent glitter to a leaden wash. The heavy heat flowed up from the earth, was not carried by the wind. She drove back to the cottage, but what in sunlight was a grateful coolness, chinked through with slits of speckled brightness bursting on brick floor or white-washed walls, was now a dark gloom. She decided to go for a walk along one of the dusty tracks that led into the plain.

From the road this plain had appeared unattractive, .. baked flatness sparsely covered with coarse growth between white patches of salt earth, ending in a low line of bushes which she presumed only hid further similar expanses. But when she passed this low border of tamarisk and tall bulrushes the whole scene abruptly changed.

She was surrounded by small regularly-shaped fields, tall with maize, close-covered with melons. There were fields of bulging and distorted tomatoes, vines, dwarf beans and rows of coarse beetroot, fields of stubble and fields with crops whose names she did not know. And all these patterns were themselves ruled off by irrigation ditches of running water, willow-lined and reed-hung. Swallows sat on the reeds, bending them towards the water. At her near approach they fluttered away, not with a sweeping flight but lazily, bat-like.

Narrow rutted lanes led off the main tracks, bordered with whitened poplars and pressed on by brambles from which the blackberries had already gone. Sometimes these lanes dipped down, embanked, and tall green canes met in a high arch over her head, rustling in a wind that did not reach to Sarah. It was in such a lane that she met Conrado face to face, the foremost sheep showing through the pall of dust that hid the rest of the flock, and she turned and walked with him because it was not possible to pass the flock and the choking dust between the high banks. They came to an open field from which barley had been carted. The sheep spread out to look for weeds and barley ears.

"Forgive me, señorita, for so much dust."

"It's not your fault."

They smiled at each other, and she thought quickly of something to say, her mind stumbling on the alien sounds. "I did not know the plain was so beautiful, so many crops and trees, fruit trees too."

"The plain? Beautiful? It is very nice. Good land, but expensive."

"Where are your fields? Is this one?"

"I have no fields. I have sheep and other animals but I'm very poor. I have to pay to graze the sheep, much

money, all the time. Much . . . much!" And he held out his hand, rubbing his thumb quickly across the lightly touching fore and middle fingers.

"You seem very happy all the same."

"No. Too much work." He swept his hand down his grimed shirt and patched trousers, an expression of disgust on his unshaven face. In the afternoon light his face was lined and tired, the skin more red than brown. "These filthy clothes, and sweat. Every day the same. I want to be rich like you." Then he was laughing again.

"Why do you think I'm rich?"

"You have a car, and Juanita says your clothes cost much. You use scent. How many pesetas was the car?"

"It's hired."

"How many pesetas a month?"

She had been asked that type of question very often, but now she halved her usual truthful answer, remembering his expression of disgust at his condition.

"Ecce! *Caramba!*" He flicked his fingers in a way that Sarah could remember doing as a schoolgirl when there was no teacher to tell her it was common. She had never expected to hear a Spaniard say "*caramba*".

"How long will you stay in Spain?"

"Not long, perhaps a week. I've already been here four months."

"That's long! Forgive me asking, but you are married?"

"I was. My husband was killed in the war."

"Oh, *pobre!* In Germany?"

"No." She hesitated. Then, mostly out of a desire to talk after a week of silence, she told Conrado the reason for her coming to Spain. It took some time to tell because although they could understand the simple sense of each short sentence there were many words which she did not know or pronounced so badly that he could only guess at

their meaning. They sat on a grass bank and she spoke to the sound of sheep bells and Conrado's shouts at the dog to stop the sheep edging towards a field of maize.

"I am trying to think if I remember that storm," Conrado said, taking off his cap and rubbing the back of his head. His brown hair was short and fine, very clean compared to his face and clothes. Through the rough parting the scalp showed white.

Sarah snapped off a yellow stalk of grass and picked at the hard earth. He would remember, she thought. There would suddenly come a piece of peasant cunning, the slap on the knee and "*Caramba!* yes, a big storm!" And his lie would be made up of one part kindness, two parts desire and seven parts in the hope of a tip. Already she was resentful.

He wanted to remember because she was sad and also beautiful. Then he decided that even if he could remember he would say nothing. Better for her to forget. He had been a fool to speak impulsively, but then his mouth was always open and empty although God knew he tried hard to let it fill from his mind first.

"No, I don't remember. How could I? I'm sorry I spoke."

And he was puzzled by a gleam of pleasure across her face, wondering if she understood properly. He felt the dull burn of frustration at his ignorance of her language and his face reddened.

The rough ground hurt her and she stood up, brushing the dust and grass from her skirt. "I must go back. I wonder what the time is?"

He glanced at where the thinning clouds showed the sun sinking below a grey hill and toy castle. "Not yet seven." He was disappointed; she was so *simpatica* and there were many questions he wanted to ask, about

England and her unimaginable life and the war, which he supposed had been bigger than the Civil War but not so cruel and terrible. And all he could think of, and blurt out, was whether there were sheep in England. And of course she did not know the word for sheep until he pointed to the nearest one, and no sooner had he pointed than the *fascista* squatted on its haunches and urinated. It was difficult to know whether she laughed at that or at his question.

And Sarah would have liked to talk with him again, but if she suggested that they met tomorrow at the same time he would only take it as a brazen advance. Yet his simplicity and the peace of the sky were about her.

"That's a funny-shaped walnut tree, like a bird," he said, pointing to a corner of the field.

"Yes, it is . . . well, good night." She smiled and he held out his hand, watching her walk down the track, stumbling sometimes where the thick dust hid the ruts. He wondered if she would come tomorrow, and if so whether she would remember the walnut tree.

And so did Sarah, as she tried carefully to sort out the confusion of evening light and reversed paths.

The next day was cloudy too and Sarah was glad. She would not have found the field again but for the tree, and even so it was late when she arrived. Conrado had given up hope and when she suddenly appeared, dusty and tired, he could not conceal his pleasure. He had brought a bottle of water and some grapes against her coming and was delighted to find her tired and thirsty.

They sat in the field and talked with the familiarity of strangers who are drawn to each other but who expect to part in a short time. Even so they were both dissatisfied, chafed by the inadequacy of their contact. Once away

from everyday topics there were so many words which Sarah did not know, and each of them was given a hacked-out image of the other's life which they had to sketch in for themselves, against a background unknown to either.

They learnt each other's names, although Sarah had to ask him to write his surname in a smooth patch of dust. As soon as she spoke she was embarrassed in case he was unable to write, and it gave her irrational pleasure to find that his handwriting was elaborate and beautifully shaped. He asked her to guess his age. She suggested thirty-five and when he laughed she thought that she had flattered him.

"No. Twenty-eight."

She was shocked, then pitying. She looked down, and noticed for the first time the wrinkled skin on the back of his hands.

"That's what hard work does," he said, "and then you wonder why I want to be rich and eat well, and not get up at four every morning. You think looking after sheep is just sitting in a field in the sun."

"But you are happy, aren't you?" She willed him to say yes, as though his happiness was a part of hers.

"I suppose so. I love Juanita and Joachim, sometimes I love this country. But always I want more. Do you understand?"

"What more? You're a Catholic, aren't you, you must have your religion."

"You think that makes me happy? Then why isn't everyone happy in Spain? In spite of it being the best and most beautiful country in the world, except England," he added seriously and then they both laughed. It was too difficult to explain, and the subject was changed. When they parted Conrado asked her if she had seen the river.

"No, where is it?"

"Not far. The sheep will have finished this field by tonight and tomorrow I take them to the river banks. It is cooler there, very beautiful. Look, by that long line of trees. If you followed this path you would reach the river. But tomorrow will be cloudless and you will swim."

"Perhaps, I'll see. If not tomorrow we'll talk some other evening." They shook hands unnecessarily, and his grasp lingered.

She wanted to go to the river on the following evening but instead she drove to the white town in the hills across the bay. What had appeared distantly white and romantic turned into hot grey dust and shouting children. She left the car in the main *plaza* by the church and then sat outside a café and asked for *manzanilla*. It was seven o'clock; the shadows of the poplars would be reaching the far banks of the unknown stream and Conrado would be lying in the grass, watching the track for her arrival.

She sat a long time, smoking, pouring the pale strong wine, watching children climb about the car with as little interest as though it belonged to a stranger. She tried not to think, then she tried only to think of Robert, but the wine confused her.

She ground her cigarette-butt into a saucer. A young girl walked by and stared at her, studying her aloneness, her drink and the cigarette. And suddenly Sarah was aware of the girl in a way that she had not been aware of other people for a long time, and envied her. She supposed that once upon a time her own outlook had been similar, a complex yet mercurially simple interflack of moods, when happiness or sadness, love or hate, were larger than the words themselves. But now all that was lost, criss-crossed and blurred, tangled with inexpert

handling. In those days (so it now seemed) she had lived. Now she only thought about living, and when she tried to think no clear answer would come, the black and white sharpness had run together in a muddled yearning grey-ness. Time itself had thickened, scaline, upon her.

She paid her bill and as she walked to the car, feeling the sherry stretch the skin of her face, she tried to forget her thoughts. She began to hum, singing the words in her head: “. . . is like a haunting refrain: she'll start upon her marathon and run around your brain. You . . . can't escape . . .” and over and over again, past the vineyards where the first grapes were being picked, through the tunnels of the plane trees from which cicadas rasped.

“You swam yesterday?”

“In the morning. I slept a little in the afternoon and then drove to Guras for a drink.”

“A drink?”

“A little *manzanilla*.”

“That's strange.”

“Why?”

“It seems a strange thing to do. I was hoping you would talk.”

“I would have liked to come. But what will people say if they see us together every evening? It will make Juanita angry.”

“I couldn't be seen lying upon the river bank with a Spanish girl without people talking. Not even standing up, for long. But you are a foreigner and so it's rather different. We are not ignorant like the Andalusians, we know it is customary for you to go about alone and be free. People won't think any the worse of you than they do already for being seen with me. And you are looking

for your husband. I have said nothing, but one of the Guardia Civil recognised you from your first visit."

"I *was* looking," she said quickly, "but that's over now. And this evening I came to say good-bye, because I think I shall go away tomorrow or the next day."

It was true that she thought she should go. For in spite of her avoided thoughts last night, she had found herself waiting impatiently for the evening and the river. All day the thought of Conrado waiting and watching while the shadows lengthened and hope dwindled had hurt her. She would see him once more and go.

"It makes me sad, that you go so soon. But I understand, there is nothing here."

"There is much here, and I enjoy talking with you. But I feel that I'm not being just. Even if I am a foreigner Juanita can hardly like me seeing you in the evening."

"Juanita is my wife and will mind her own business. She has more than enough to do without meddling with me. Besides, she knows nothing."

(But Juanita loved Conrado with the depth of knowledge. She lived for him and their son; it was only *his* day's work that was beginning to etch itself into her face. And yet for all his strength and goodness he could not resist the temptation of women, and, even worse, found it impossible to hide these brief but terrible infatuations which she recognised as soon as they began. For a few weeks all her own work and love counted for nothing, and she in turn would cease to love Joachim, who came between her and her contemplation of Conrado's obsession. To her this was a bigger sin than his, and it permitted her to watch him with compassion.

Her greatest difficulty was to avoid showing open hatred for the women, mostly women she had known all her life, whose feast days she had celebrated, with whom as a girl

she had probably confided in, telling them of her love for Conrado. To go with him was bad enough, but they took money as well.

When she had seen Conrado talk to the foreigner in the car, even when he told her to arrange the room, she had expected only to be teased. And for a week she knew that nothing had happened, because he talked too much. Then suddenly he had stopped talking.

She doubted if this woman would want him and that was added cause for hatred; she could have killed Sarah without a qualm. And yet in another way she hoped that Sarah did want him; she would leave soon, drive away into a different world. This was one happiness he could have without hurting her too much. She wondered what the Mother of God would think if she lit a candle to help Conrado's desire. Looked at like that it was a terrible blasphemy, but, after all, the circumstances were unusual and Conrado's happiness a great good. Perhaps, as a very special favour, she might be allowed to take the sin for herself.)

Beneath the poplars by the river, a hedge of tamarisk screening them from the fields, Sarah and Conrado half lay in the short grass while the sheep grazed round them. Only the tops of the trees showed the rusty gold of sun. It faded and the glow of a solitary cloud in the east faded too. The surface of the river was patched with paws of wind, and fish began to rise, some leaping clear of the liquid colours of the surface, falling awkwardly on their sides. The last swallows skimmed the river and the first bats zig-zagged above them; blue shadows fell from the trees and the short grass was cool to the tips of their fingers.

She became aware of his silence and turned her eyes from the river. He was looking at her; she recognised that

wide sad stare, the averted eyes that returned at once, the hand advanced half-way across the narrow space dividing them, unwilling to retreat, afraid to advance. She smiled at him, sad too, for the evening and the river and the trees flowed silently through her mind into the hidden sea, touching unknown nerves ineffably. Nevermore, she thought, all this for him but not for me. This is his good fortune and happiness, this is why he is virtuous and loves Juanita, never looking at other women until I came. He is innocent, tomorrow I shall go and leave him this.

'She will go,' thought Conrado, 'and this time I shall never recover. I would die if I could go with her, away from this cursed place and the dirt, the work, those filthy women I've had. But I can't escape Juanita and the sheep, Joachim and the house. If I could, I would . . . yes, I would. If she goes I shall be glad to die.'

"How did your scar come?"

"My what?"

"Scar."

She did not understand and he lifted his hand. Very gently, almost as though the flesh was still raw, he touched the line of her eyebrow and ran his finger towards her temple. She put up her hand and caught hold of his, knowing what would happen, almost not wanting it to happen. And yet she knew no other way to obtain what she did not know she wanted: intangibilities, intimations, that shaded down and down to human things that she *could* understand, gratitude and affection and the betraying stir of blood. She pressed his hand. There was a sound in his throat like a protest and then they moved so that they could kiss.

She smelt sheep and sweat and garlic as she realised that he could not even wait for them to reach the shelter of the hedge. There was a dried pile of sheep droppings within

inches of her face. Suddenly she wanted to stop and to forget, but her body and her hands were his accomplices. Then, as she took the thrust of his loins, she wanted slowness and the honey drag of flesh. But he was too incredulous of his luck, too transported, too afraid of discovery, too discordant with the knowledge that he was unwashed and his clothes stank; there was scarcely time to thrust his hand roughly, hotly, to brush her blood-hard nipples and cup her breasts before he felt the iron-hard earth flow up his legs and spine and through his open lips into her mouth. For a long moment he lay rigid and then his lips relaxed.

She knew it was over; the liquid colours of the river and the leaping fish, the dark blue leaves turning against the green sky and the star that trembled to the sound of a wool-dulled bell lay pressed for a long moment against her mouth. He moved rebelliously against sadness; the hard ground hurt her back; it was finished.

"Don't go tomorrow, stay one more day at least, *niña*. Just one more day. It's so late now, Juanita . . . and I must speak once more. Promise? Promise?"

"I promise," she said. "I must hurry now. But tomorrow evening."

If tomorrow morning it seemed more sensible to break her promise she would pack as soon as Carmen went to the fields and leave for France. But she knew now, as she lay in bed and waited for sleep, that she would not leave and break her promise, it was only comforting to know that she could.

She slept, and at some point in her dreams she saw, fleetingly, the black river and the steady total movement of its surface, copper green and run-metal blue, gold and faint yellow.

The wooden shutters were already warm with sun when she went downstairs, greeting Carmen warily as though she expected Juanita already to have called with a tale of betrayal. But everything seemed the same.

When she left the track and pushed through the gap in the hedge she saw him standing against a half-grown poplar tree looking towards her. Something, she thought, the evening glow or happiness at her arrival, had touched his worn face with youth again. He stood without moving and she went to him, seeing his eyes glance across the river, back again to the track, and then she was leaning the weight of her body against him within the pressure of his arms, could feel the faint push of the trunk of the tree as the wind moved steadily through the leafy branches. He was speaking softly in Catalan, words she could understand.

He chose a place to sit, shadowed and hidden, with a low bank against which they leant. He held her hand shyly, not speaking, waiting for the relief that she had come to ebb away.

"You are very elegant tonight," she said, touching his shaven face, pointing to his clean blue shirt and trousers.

"No. These are very old, I have better clothes at home."

"Won't Juanita be suspicious? So smart and clean, just for sheep?"

"I don't think so. It wasn't my day to shave and change, but what of it? I'm free. She knows nothing, I tell you."

(Juanita had finished feeding the pigs and was about to kill one of the penned rabbits for supper. He would be surprised and grumble a little at the extravagance, but also pleased. Tonight he would be hungry. She was very

tired and her hands stank from the filth of the pigsty. Somewhere in the fields, probably by the river, he and the woman would be together. Juanita was thin-lipped with hatred against herself. She could still hear Joachim sobbing in the house into which she had cuffed him when her self-control had snapped by his incessant picking at her attention. She took the rabbit into the house, stroking its bony softness, and killed it as swiftly as she could.)

By the river Conrado lay with his eyes closed. He was at rest but not asleep, stroking the line of bone that ran from her index finger to her wrist. She glanced at his face with a gentle amusement; for all the fevered intensity with which he had pretended concern for her satisfaction, he had not been concerned. It did not matter. She was aware only of the death of time, the smell of grass and the clean smell of sheep, the damask sky, trees and the shot silkiness of water. And each golden moment that passed in peace was more beautiful than the last, as the little store ran out and speech and plans began to stain their mouths.

Their love lasted ten days, and in that time it was filled with deceit and fear and smeared with scandal. Their meetings were quickly noted and both Juanita and Carmen told. It was only Juanita who prevented Carmen from ordering Sarah to leave the house, but she could not prevent the black atmosphere of disapproval from slowly poisoning Sarah's days.

But instinctively Conrado and Sarah had known all this would happen, that they would be lucky even to have a few days in their foolish paradise. They had known too that the ineradicable differences between them could never be resolved. As far as they could they licked the sugar from the pill and when the bitter taste came through they stopped.

"Will you ever come back again?" he asked, as they smoked their last cigarette. It was long past their usual time for parting, but tonight neither of them cared that the first stars were already in the east.

"Perhaps. But it will never be the same again. I know you understand that."

"Yes, I understand. I have been very happy. Now . . ."

" . . . Only unhappy for a short while, Conrado. It will be the same for me."

"Yes. We have been very lucky in a way. Ever to have met . . ." And his mind filled slowly with unimaginable millions of people, with incalculable distances and unknown countries. The sheep bleated a protest against the dampness of their wool. "There is one last favour. I have written a letter which you should open before you get to France, any time when you have left the village. It is nothing of great importance, but promise you won't open it before you go, nor forget it."

"I promise," she answered seriously. "Shall I understand?"

"Oh yes." He smiled. "I have not used difficult words."

Suddenly she wanted to be alone, to go away. She leant over and kissed his hair. "Shall I go now, Conrado?"

"Yes; please. *Adios*, Sarah." She tried to smile, saddened by the now familiar unfamiliarity of her name as pronounced by him.

"*Adios*, Conrado."

They looked into each other's eyes and then, reluctantly touching his face with her finger-tips, she stood up and turned away. She heard him rise to his feet, knew that he was watching her disappear. In the translucent darkness of late evening the whispering and darkling river, the

whispering and black trees set with a few stars, moved coldly with her, were breathed in, tripped her feet with the roughness of the track; Conrado stayed behind.

She left the car in Gerona and caught the afternoon train. She took out Conrado's letter. From its thickness she thought that it would be long and was curious to know what he wished to say, half hoping for a revival of pain. But it was only a sheet of paper with the words, "Do not be angry," and a little wad of filthy peseta notes which added up exactly to the money she had paid to Carmen. In the centre of the wad, cut out with meticulous care, but with the left forearm missing, was a dulled photograph of Conrado, smiling and young, dressed in his best clothes, a white flower in his lapel. And she could picture Juanita by his side, shy and proud, their arms linked.

She put the envelope and its contents in her handbag. She leant her head against the back of the seat, watching white clouds mushroom above the blue Pyrenees.

(XIII)

Sarah only stayed a short time with Edmee, and told her nothing about Conrado. *She* was not ashamed but she was afraid that Edmee might be. And this affair with Conrado was too strangely personal, too delicate; in the clumsy hands of another it would be damaged, perhaps irretrievably.

If she had consciously longed for him she would inevitably have spoken of him. But from the beginning she had understood the gulf between them, and understood it even on the few occasions when she had sensually indulged

in day-dreams of herself and Conrado living together on some idyllic farm that sprawled from the mountains to the sea, beyond reality. She had refused to admit that such a life would be impossible for her, but had sensed that Conrado was bound by other laws. Not the laws of his Church, some law which he had either imposed on himself or had had imposed; to her the effect was the same. Whatever it was it prevented her longing for his presence, and the nostalgia she might have felt transmuted itself into a diffused glow which overlaid the pain of the past months. (Unknowingly she often thought of Conrado, remembering heaped flower stalls in the Ramblas, the cool tunnels of plane trees floored with white road, the comfort of Vicente, the red dazzle of sun through closed eyes.)

She returned to London at the beginning of October, and was pleased to find that four months had scattered her circle of Americans. She was in a rebellious mood, submitting to the settled routine of the office but refusing to submit to the settled and meaningless routine of her previous social life and promiscuity. The discontent that had been slowly growing before she left England suddenly came to a head and now this previous existence seemed worthless; not wrong, merely childishly dull.

But what she increasingly regarded as a weak-willed lust had been the compulsive mirage of her desert, where the palms whispered reassuringly that she could love and be loved, and there also were the transcendental waters to which Robert had accustomed her. Least of all did she understand (in fact believed the opposite) that promiscuity had petrified her ability to feel for others, and that what had appeared as an increasing sensitivity was for herself alone. Slowly but surely all the men with whom

she had slept had become less and less real, more and more symbols of what she once had known and for which she searched. And she had wondered why her sexual behaviour had become increasingly extravagant, unnatural; she had blamed it on drink and made amends by excessively sentimental behaviour immediately afterwards. But the slack mouths she had kissed, the arms in which she had insisted on sleeping, had been her own mouth and her own arms, comforting her own self for the absence of love.

Gradually this insensitivity had infected her relationship with everyone she came in contact with; even toward Emmanuel and Mrs. Batchly she had changed, felt little interest except self-interest. But because this process had seemed so slow, because it involved the gradual concentration of all her interest on to herself as an entity cut off from the rest of the world (until she could no longer see herself in relation to other people) Sarah had been unaware of what was taking place. The long months in Spain and the short time with Conrado helped also to overlay the past, and now the attitude of mind in which she returned to London seemed not only to have been foreshadowed but also a proof of maturity. And a proof of her own strength, for she had always intended to end her promiscuity when she began her search for Robert. She did not consider going with Conrado to be an act of promiscuity, she could not define it, only knowing that it was different from any other experience.

In Spain this hardness had been shed, but now it returned and was the more harsh because of the contempt with which she regarded her previous way of life. She began to assume the role of a serious-minded adult, choosing ballet instead of musical comedy, Continental films instead of American, concerts at the Albert Hall instead of the

Sunday night drinking which had been one of her favourite defiances against her working week.

These things she would do three or four evenings a week, sometimes with Michael, more often by herself. Secretly she admitted that much of the time she was bored, particularly by opera and concerts, and for this reason she preferred to go alone, for most of her acquaintances would have been equally bored, and she told herself that she was sparing others an ordeal. In truth the knowledge of their boredom only underlined the pointlessness of what she did. But being with Michael was no strain. He fitted in with her moods so easily that often she would forget his presence.

Michael had joined the firm a fortnight before Sarah left for Spain, and by the time she returned he gave the impression that he had worked there for years. He had been extremely pleased that Sarah's absence would give him the opportunity of ingratiating himself with Emmanuel and mercilessly picking his brains. Nor had he found this difficult. He had at once made the point of having been Robert's greatest friend and Emmanuel accepted this, remembering that Michael had been Robert's best man and had gone with him to North Africa. He had often heard Mr. Valmont speak of Robert as though of a son: the esteem and help that he would so gladly have given Robert was now Michael's.

Michael was not very surprised to find that office work came easily after the more complicated routine to which he had been accustomed. And although he possessed no flair in the matter of judging colour and quality he even turned that to advantage, flattering Emmanuel by saying that he could not hope to reach his standards except after years of experience.

He was more than content to accompany Sarah whenever she asked him. And if he did not experience the brief moments of intense beauty which sometimes came to Sarah, at least he was spared her far longer periods of boredom. He found a satisfaction merely being inside Covent Garden or sitting in a box at the Albert Hall. Besides, Robert had never done this. One lunch time he bought a small book on the ballet, and the next time he and Sarah saw *Les Sylphides* surprised her by referring to *arabesques penchées*.

(XIV)

Soon after her return Emmanuel raised the question of Bandhu. The last visit had been made by him in the winter of 1938, and in his opinion Patras should be shown that the death of Mr. Valmont did not mean any slackening of supervision. Sarah ought also to see the property and forest areas at first hand. Michael should go too, both for experience and as escort.

"December's the best time, Miss Sarah, the weather's lovely then. Sunshine all day and cool at night. But we ought to let Patras know as soon as possible. It's October now and he'll have plenty to do what with the November crop being cut and having to get the bungalow ready and arrange for servants from Ranchi."

But Sarah decided to go at the end of January, not wanting to start another period of travel so soon after the months she had already spent living out of two suitcases. She was encouraged in this by Michael, who wanted to strengthen their growing intimacy before they would be thrown together in the isolation of Bandhu. It was agreed that they should leave by air on January 27th and spend a month in India.

By the end of the year Sarah looked forward more and more to her visit. Her present phase of serious-mindedness was beginning to pall but she could think of nothing (apart from India) to take its place. She assured herself that it was not loneliness from which she suffered, *that* she could have cured at any time. She found an increasing preference to be alone, to wander by herself on a Sunday afternoon round the National Gallery, to shop by herself in the King's Road on Saturday; and yet she was aware that when she did these things she was more conscious of people than of pictures, of shoppers than shop windows. But the scarcely remembered hunger of before was now touched with a faintly contemptuous curiosity and a nebulous feeling of power and pride. Sometimes she would notice a man who immediately (against her conscious will) attracted her, and then she would find pleasure in fleetingly giving him some encouragement, followed at once by a hostile stare.

But her discontent did not reach the point of active unhappiness. For discontent (a vague troubling uneasiness and emptiness) was far too usual a condition to find remarkable.

Ten days before they were due to fly Sarah visited her doctor for the necessary injections against typhoid, cholera and smallpox. It was a bitterly cold day and both in the office and the waiting-room she had sat as near the heating as possible. All that night she attributed her severe headache and fever to the typhoid injection. The following morning she was obviously extremely ill. Her doctor made the understandable mistake of diagnosing the beginning of pneumonia as a severe reaction to her injection.

For a fortnight she lived the chaos of distorted time; the

long-short hours that moved erratically through the room were sipped down with the hot drinks, the bitter medicines, the green-jewelled richness of muscatels. As time became more ordered and danger passed she was aware of danger, then aware of the enfolding comfort of her bed, the touch of cool linen, the demanding warm security of being waited on. She wondered how she would have behaved if she had been old and poor, a friendless distressed gentlewoman in a bed-sitting-room at Earl's Court. Her tired and erratic mind slipped away; better not to think of the end of one's life, those years as greyly dreary as a wet June Sunday afternoon in a slum street in Stepney, pointless, hopeless, loveless. Something must be done, she thought. She must marry again, adopt children, somehow take out an insurance against life.

It was three weeks before she was allowed downstairs. The weather was still severe, the garden full of hard dirty snow. It recalled the first winter of the war, recalled also the glittering and now voluptuous heat of Spain. The slow return of strength expressed itself as irritated discontent, she longed to be free of the lethargic sickness which still clouded her mind, yet was physically too weak to make any effort, too irritable to tolerate the company of other people. It was Mrs. Batchly who, for want of something to say, vaguely spoke about a sea trip.

Immediately Sarah's mind fastened on the idea. She would combine sun and convalescence. The only drawback was the prospect of mixing with other passengers, and suddenly she realised that now she did not even want to be with Michael. He could join her in Bombay, and her own cabin would be a sufficient sanctuary. Without consulting anyone she phoned the P & O.

For a week her plan appeared impossible. All berths to

the East were booked for months ahead, and there was a waiting list for last-minute cancellations. But the thought of a long sea journey alone, of blue water and sun, now obsessed her. Driven by this and the irritability of her convalescence she laid siege to the booking office, weak as she was, going there in person every day. The more impossible it seemed the more determined she became, until the clerk with whom she dealt began to believe that the whole passenger list was named Mrs. Sarah Middleton. And thirty-six hours before the boat sailed a first-class single cabin was cancelled.

The clerk slowly worked his way through the short list of people who were prepared to leave at less than three days' notice. This one was out of London, that one had left by air a week before, the next had decided to travel third-class, the fourth had forgotten his inoculations. Triumphantlly he began to dial Sarah's number.

BOOK FOUR

(I)

SURROUNDING Sarah's departure was a nervous and unreasoning violence, for the normal vacillating check and countercheck which ruled her thoughts and actions (that fluctuating compromise which never satisfied) was disrupted by her illness.

Not until she began to climb the gangway did she allow this tension to relax. Into the noise of the ship, into the atmosphere seething with the beginning of a journey to a distant country she stepped into a silence, a peace.

The rough seas heaved and span in her head, heaved heavily in her stomach as though she had spooned up a bowl of congealing fishy fat. She lay on her bunk, alone in the softly creaking cabin, sometimes watching the glass carafe move its position around the motionless water, the motionless silken dressing-gown sway across the door.

She would read until the print ached against her eyes; then lie still and feel the mattress push up against her like the lung of a whale. Doors slammed and sometimes people laughed. The stewardess brought her pots of tea, fruit and a bright cheerfulness. She was sorry Sarah felt so poorly, glad because first-class passengers who were sick usually tipped well, guilty because she was glad and then forgot.

Few thoughts came to Sarah. Her exhausted body could not tolerate her swimming mind. It was enough to

be still, to be alone, to be cut off in so physical a way from the ceaseless and the meaningless. But even this she did not think about. She lay still; did not attempt to touch the frangibility, the iridescence. But in the evening time, as the white light of reflected foam sucked light from the corners of the creaking cabin to throw it in noiseless waves across the ceiling, Sarah would thicken the iridescent walls with luminol, for sickness robbed the day of time and gave it to the night. And soon peace would be absolute, the body heavy and yet weightless, the sway and lift of the cabin a dark hypnosis.

And in the morning sleep was a cobweb across her face, difficult to determine, to brush away, persisting all day, retreating as the shiny stewardess advanced, flowing back more strongly.

The colour of the sea changed from grey to an opaque green, white-streaked with mutton-fat jade; to a green-blue flecked with Chinese white, then to a peacock-blue. The blunt white arrow left a shining wake. As the water strained itself clear of the living green, so sleep and silence and the process of life, solitude and distance and unfamiliarity, strained Sarah's mind of its living incubus, leaving it crystalline, desireless and malleable.

She leant against the rail, sipping a cup of soup. In the hazy distance mountains rose from the unmoving blue, from beaches of unimaginable beauty; black-rocked and sea-urchin-cruel, the heat quiver bent by the breeze from the sea. The blue sea flickered and the chocolate mountains melted in the sun. They joined, and there beauty must blaze, in the gold of sand, the sound of waves, in the rainbow of foam and the pebbles that rolled like jewels to the sighing wash.

And it came to her unreflectingly, effortlessly. It

coloured all her mind with the same simplicity and mystery as the colourless water of the sea is kingfisher-blue, Prussian blue, aquamarine and purple.

The soup sent her back to the now so familiar and, in a way, loved cabin. The stewardess was once more annoyed and pleased at the same time. Sarah slept until the late afternoon, and when she awoke she was ravenously hungry.

She had wanted privacy. The physical and nervous exhaustion which had forced an immediate withdrawal to her cabin saved her from the careless smile, the lightly spoken 'Good morning' that in the first twenty-four hours would have bound her irrevocably to set companions for the voyage. Now, on her first visit to the dining-saloon, she asked to see the table plan and watched her name appear at a table for four occupied only by Mr. Mukerjee and Mr. Foy. The Hindu from Calcutta and the Chinaman from Hong Kong were not encouraged by her to withdraw their minds from those two cities.

Politely, but with a firmness that discouraged even the brashest, she refused to allow her silence and rest to be broken. As the sun peeled off the days and the soft white skin of its too-eager seekers with an equal indifference, so Sarah's strength returned. And it brought with it moments of unreflecting happiness which were akin to the happiness of a wild animal well fed and sun-warmed, a contentment on the hither side of good or evil. By chance she was satisfying certain conditions and a certain result was produced. But these were mere flashes; of their very nature hardly recognisable as happiness. Only a dolphin leaping, the taste of food on her hungry tongue, the luminous green trail of a falling star.

Even the gritty dross of Port Said enchanted her although the monstrous leather pouffes, patterned with

pyramid and camel and loading every rowboat, had an ugliness that could have disrupted the trance of a mystic. She merely smiled inwardly, regarding their banality as uncritically as she regarded her own banal acceptance of Port Said as the gateway to the mysterious East.

And yet for her it was a gateway from one physical world into another, spectacularly strange as they glided through the desert while the life of the ship itself, its noises and the pulse-like rise and fall and twist, were stilled in a daylight sleep. The desert seemed its inconsequential dream, a desert of running water, tree-studded, green with crops, golden with sand. It was not possible to escape its influence, it was breathed in with the sudden heat, the rash of summer dresses and shorts, a new ease of manner on the part of Mr. Mukerjee, the appearance of curry and Bombay duck on the menu.

And for Sarah an increase in remoteness.

Once more the ship was a ship and once more there were ochreous mountains seen across the retreating shimmer of living colour. She sat in a deck-chair beneath an awning, her library book open on her lap.

Unbidden, almost casually, imagined scenes of beauty came again to her mind. But more piercingly now for she was free of the mist of illness, the slow dropping spin of vertigo, the lethargy of sleeping tablets. There was a poignancy too which pierced, a shared remoteness and solitude untouched by the egotism of loneliness. Her other mountains and that other sea had been in her imagination a setting for humanity. Even if she had not seen the white dots of Murcian hill towns they were there, she knew that they existed. And, in their own way, added depth to beauty.

But what she saw now was empty of humanity, and she responded more strongly. Nothing could exist in such a

burnt-out purity, purged equally by the inferno of a July afternoon or the sterile crackle of December stars. Waterless, wind-eroded, the long sentence of its emptiness comma-ed with unnatural lizards, full-stopped by the cry of a sea bird. Like the desert of which it was the first bastion or the last outpost there seemed no reason for its existence, yet its very beauty flaring against her eyes spoke of strange reasons, touched some listening nerve sensitive with silence.

For the space of a few moments this nerve's vibration blotted out all other senses. A burningness that was not light ; a reaching out; a desireless yearning; a bodily heat: she opened her eyes and picked up the book. She was very tired and wondered if momentarily she had slept. She glanced again at the range of mountains, but they were only mountains sinking beneath the sea.

For the next few days she would see more mountains and more distant shores towards which shimmering flying fish launched themselves, away from the sweep of foam and the thudding pressure of the ship. And in the early morning time, while the surface of the hosed decks were still puffy and treacherous to the feet and the surface of her mind was glassy clear, something would again shimmeringly reach out; as vivid and as certain as the flying fish, coming and returning from hidden depths, existing in the alien atmosphere more briefly than the fishes' travesty of flight. A weak travesty compared to the diving terns, but flight.

And then there was only the sky and ocean and the thought, more disturbing than the spice of land itself, that almost at once she would have to pick up again the dull tangle of her existence. The moments of revealed beauty

were too ephemeral to be remembered, too strong to be forgotten. If she had considered it she would have found herself of the same school as the Greek philosophers who believed that light issued from the eye to reveal whatever was looked at. It could only have been created by herself, for herself.

On the last night she hoped and expected to wake early and watch Bombay rise with the sun. Instead she slept deeply, dreamlessly, and awoke to a summer-like warmth and the plaintively strange whistle of scavenging kite-hawks mingling with the distant rattle of machinery.

A symptom of her feverish departure from London was the sparseness of her luggage. One large suitcase of clothes needed for the voyage and a small dressing-case crammed with personal minutiae she so loved. What else was needed she intended to buy in Bombay. She dressed and finished packing quickly, over-tipped the delighted stewardess and, without waiting for breakfast disembarked.

At the Taj Mahal she asked the reception clerk whether Mr. Huyelk had arrived. She was pleased to be told that passengers from the London plane were not expected before noon, but it seemed that her pleasure was only a part of a general contentment that embraced the exotic atmosphere of fan-cooled marble, of turbaned and bare-footed servants moving silently against the square blaze of garden beyond the portico. She had hardly listened to the slender Goanese clerk, and it was not until she reached her room that Gopal explained he was her personal servant and asked how long she would be staying. He was middle-aged and soft-voiced, plump and dark-skinned. The scatter of pock-marks on his shiny face made Sarah think of a Christmas pudding. His English was easy to understand.

"I don't know how long I shall be in Bombay. Not long."

"Where will memsahib go then?" he asked, turning to face her as he opened the french windows leading to the heavy stone balcony.

"To Bihar. I have a lac factory there which I'm visiting. Do you know Bihar?"

"Yes, memsahib. I was there in the war. I was Captain Smith Sahib's bearer. Do you know him?"

"No." She looked at him gravely. "No, I don't think so."

He crossed the room and turned on the overhead fan. "Bring memsahib breakfast? Here or downstairs?"

She glanced round the room. On a balcony was an iron table and beyond it a crude boat with a brown sail danced on the bay. Sunlight slanted from left to right. "Here, Gopal, please."

She opened her dressing-case and washed her hands in the tiled bathroom. Already her face was shiny with heat and she tried to powder it carefully, but it was difficult to avoid an uneven surface. Although she had not deliberately sat in the sun during the voyage her skin was lightly tanned and now the powder was the wrong shade. It irritated her, drawing her attention to her face. She wondered if the next ten years would bring about as radical a change, erase her youth for all time.

She drew back from the mirror and considered her face dispassionately. Perhaps it was the unaccustomed brilliance of the sun striking up from the marble floor or the jarring shade of powder, perhaps a lingering underwash of illness, but suddenly she was conscious of a violent reversal of sensation, feeling now that a long time had passed and only a short time remained. She saw, as though for the first time, the ghostly outriders of the decades

stored within her flesh, the faint blur where the line of her jaw met her chin, the shadowed slackness about her eyes that could still be camouflaged, the minute but indelible lines on her forehead. And overlaying all this was the lost perfection of her skin, that exquisite texture which, once gone, has gone for ever, the very essence of youth. She turned away from the mirror and walked to the balcony.

She finished a busy morning's shopping shortly before lunch. Gopal, who loved nothing better than such an expedition, had gone with her and now stood contentedly on one side holding her parcels while she went to the desk.

"Mr. Huyelk has arrived, madam. Number 270. Shall I ring his room?"

"No, don't bother. I'll go up."

As she walked along the stone-flagged corridor she felt no emotion either way at the prospect of seeing Michael again. And she thought that her indifference arose from her fatigue, for she had been unprepared for the fierceness of the March sun reflected dazzlingly from the white-clad crowds, the enervating humidity, the startling noise of the streets.

She tapped on his door, opening it as he shouted: "Come in."

"Sarah!" He was standing by the window looking across the bay, and her first thought was how white his face seemed, bloodless. "You look wonderful, Sarah! I'd hardly have recognised you. Did you have a good trip?" He came towards her, kissing her forehead lightly. His skin smelt of stale tobacco smoke.

"I'm fine. That boat certainly did the trick, I was like a bit of chewed string for the first few days. And you?"

"Oh, not bad." He spoke nonchalantly, but in fact he

had enjoyed the long flight immensely, the atmosphere of important and mysterious Big Business. "But I'm pretty shagged—you can't sleep really well. And now this heat."

"You'd better sleep this afternoon. I could do with a rest myself, I've been shopping."

During lunch he gave her all the news of the office and the scandal concerning various mutual acquaintances which he had assiduously saved up. He found a curious pleasure in telling her about London as they sat in the air-conditioned dining-room. Distance, the drive from Juhu Airport, bullock carts, strange trees and the outlandish dress of the crowds had all been too foreign, as though he himself was lost and out of context. And he had been angry that Sarah had not waited in for him. Now, in this cosmopolitan dining-room, he was trying to re-establish his own familiar setting.

From the start he sensed her lack of interest and pressed the harder to capture it. He thought that perhaps she was waiting to tell him about her voyage. But she had almost nothing to say and he was puzzled by her remoteness.

They finished lunch and stepped once more into an envelope of wet heat. As they separated to go to their rooms he touched her hand with his sweaty fingers.

"What time will you be having tea, Sarah?"

"I hadn't thought. Some time between four and five, I expect."

"Will you give me a ring when you're ready?"

She hesitated and then nodded. "Yes, I will."

She switched on the fan and undressed. She lay naked on her bed except for a fold of sheet across her stomach. The whirr of the fan absorbed all other noises except the occasional roo-coo of pigeons searching for crumbs on the balcony or the distant sound of a ship's siren. The gentle stream of air washed her asleep.

She slept until after four and then hurriedly showered and dressed, afraid that at any minute Michael would tap on her door. She left the hotel and walked quickly towards the centre of the city. When she was tired of walking she sat on a green bench beneath tall palms, and around her servants gossiped in the shade while the terriers and spaniels they should have been exercising lay dispiritedly panting on the coarse grass. Young Indians strolled past, their fingers interlaced.

She did not return until half-past six. As she passed the desk she told the clerk to phone Mr. Huyek and say that she was back. Gopal was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the corridor; he followed her into the room, and she saw that he had carefully laid out a white evening dress with the correct underwear and shoes. He was disappointed when she changed it for something less formal.

"Is it too late for tea, Gopal? I'm terribly thirsty."

"No, memsahib, bringing now." He left the room and a few minutes later she recognised Michael's steps in the corridor.

"You are a pig, Sarah. Why didn't you phone me?" His voice was hurt, and having done what she wanted to do she could now apologise with sincerity.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were tired and I'd let you sleep on. I only went for a walk. Have you had tea? I've sent for mine."

"Tea? Why don't we have a drink?"

"Well," she answered carefully, maliciously amused, "that might be a little difficult; didn't you know there's prohibition in Bombay?"

"Good God! But not for us?"

"No . . . provided you've got a doctor's certificate saying you can't live without it. I'm rather glad. I'm on the wagon."

"What on earth for?"

"Fun. I didn't want anything, couldn't have faced anything, the first few days on board, and then I thought I'd have a change."

"How long will this last?"

"Till I'm tired of it. I don't miss it now."

"Bloody place!" Sarah was surprised at the venom in his voice. She would have been even more surprised if she had understood that what chiefly annoyed him was the news that she herself was not drinking. Ever since five o'clock when he had phoned through, his vague uneasiness had been reassured by the thought that on her return they could sit in her room drinking. Then her mood would change, there would be a re-establishment of contact.

She was speaking: "Don't be childish, Michael. It's only for one night, you can spend all tomorrow having your liver examined or whatever they do."

"If you're on the wagon there doesn't seem much point, I don't like drinking alone. But perhaps I will after all. You're bound to break down sooner or later and then I can come to your rescue," and he tried to smile pleasantly, but Sarah was not looking.

(II)

Intending only to spend four or five days in Bombay Sarah eventually stayed a fortnight. Even then Michael thought that she only left because of his impatience and the inconvenience she might cause Patras by delaying her arrival a second time. But beneath her surface reluctance Sarah was ready to go. She had been fascinated by the city, but she was totally prohibited by barriers of language and ignorance from penetrating its purely visual form, and

she felt that if she delayed much longer all the deep and inexplicable satisfaction she found would crumble away.

At first the spell of the city had been intense, would lie in her eyes when they opened to the blue morning sweep of the landlocked bay and the far distant blue-green hills already retreating to a remoter solitude behind a haze of heat. When she tried to penetrate that solitude through the medium of Gopal his answer only made it more remote.

"Not knowing, memsahib. Junglies living there, catching fevers and eating monkeys."

She was silent, feeling the silken dressing-gown move in the morning breeze that came to the balcony, waiting for Gopal to finish pouring her coffee. "Have you lived long in Bombay?"

"Born in Madras. But living many years in Bombay, and my wife too."

"And you've never been across the bay?"

"Not wanting, memsahib." He left the balcony and began to collect yesterday's used underwear for his wife to launder. This talk made him uneasy. Forming in his mind was a green stillness, a rankness, a heavy sweat of heat and the flash of purple from a butterfly that vanished when it settled on dead leaves. "Today shopping, memsahib?"

Sarah nodded. Shopping was her standard excuse to go with Gopal alone through the city. Though Michael wanted to come she would not let him, saying that his presence while she shopped would fret her into hurrying. Luckily, he had discovered a European bathing club and was happy enough to spend his mornings there.

From the hotel she and Gopal would drive to the central markets. Walking behind her, cuffing the too-persistent children who hoped to carry her purchases, Gopal let her wander at will. They would saunter down exotic avenues

of brilliant fruit: pomegranates, guavas and papaya, mango and mangosteens. Oblivious to the pleading shouts she let the symmetrical heaps from strange groves and orchards slide through her mind; then garland-hung stalls where the scent of white ropes of jasmine seemed to be breathed from the pink lotus and scarlet gladioli, paled by the black red of roses, themselves scentless in the swimming scent of tuberose. There were gardenias and golden orchids, delicate as the down of canaries, and blue sprays of the fleshy vanda orchid, portulaca and marigold, hibiscus and cornflowers.

She did not enter the meat market. Holding her handkerchief to her nose she would glance in and see the heads of goats and the fantastic ropes of gut which she reluctantly supposed must be edible. Nor did she do more than walk quickly through the fish market, only tolerating the smell for the sake of the spider crabs and turtles, giant prawns and venomously-tailed rays. Then into the swelter of the courtyards heaped with golden maize and scarlet chilis, glistening piles of black and viscid tobacco. Unconscious of the heat, fanning away the clustering flies, she moved through an unseen heaviness of spat betel juice that stained the stones, of sweat and spices, of trodden filth underfoot, the sharp ammoniac of bullock urine. There were tethered deer and chained monkeys, a mongoose dancing red-eyed in a battered cage, orioles and parrots and yellow-wattled mynahs.

Suddenly tired, suddenly aware of the heat and noise she would turn her back on the Chinese women who fondled anxious-eyed ducks in so macabre a fashion. She and Gopal would leave the market and take a gharri, sitting forward on the hot leather seat to prevent sweat staining through the back of her thin dress. They would thread their way through narrow swarming streets, the

sun pressing on her head, her senses stormed by the jagged surge of sound, the zigzag strike of colour from yellow turbans, vermilion saris, white dazzle of shirt and dhoti against dark flesh. And the smell of food tainted through with sun-rotting garbage, a smell more surfeiting than food itself.

In arcaded bazaars the relief from the sun was cancelled by the cloy of spiced tobacco smoke. She would sit in a chair on the carpeted dais of some merchant while gold- and silver-bordered saris cascaded from their bolts and lay in coloured pools around her. Gopal would dabble brown fingers in the pool and knowingly shake his head, quarrelling fiercely with his friend the seller.

In this setting of exotic squalor the stuffs she bought glowed with a false beauty. She knew this; what she bought was the anonymity of a tourist, and so could hide in the only role acceptable to the narrow demands of the city. Within that role it was easier for everyone to forget she was a stranger, cut off from the teeming life around her. She was a willing victim to the hypnotic greed of the bulging merchants.

Within the simple passivity of this camouflage her rested mind suddenly took on a complex activity. She was aware of the external world in a way she had never before experienced, recording and storing impressions unrelated to herself. A man absorbed in picking his nose did just that, did not do something which she found distasteful. A child, eyes lustrous in the fat brown satin of his face, moved her for his beauty. She felt pity for the seated beggar with enormous swollen testicles enclosed in a filthy bag of cloth, for his hopelessness, not the familiar flash of self-identification with some equivalent suffering.

And the lurid flooding evening light, a crescent moon with an improbable star set beyond its horns, the leaning

palms, the street of coppersmiths where floating wicks gleamed in burnished points from a thousand bowls, a thousand candlesticks, all burned for her undimmed by an echoing "mine . . . mine . . ." Burned the more brightly because she and they were separated by barriers through which she could never pass nor ever understand. There were incense-heavy temples into which she persuaded a reluctant Gopal to take her, images gong-haunted and shadowed, a phallus hung with jasmine, wet with the milk of coconut. She moved slowly, carefully, through their shadowed darknesses, her damp stockinged feet chilling the flags of stone, sensing the slow permeation of faith that breathed from repelling images. Nor did she fight against this slow fascination, for she was certain that this was no concern of hers.

If she had been alone all the time she would have tired much sooner of the city. But Michael provided an antidote to the richness, and she ate the stale bread of his presence at lunch and dinner. If she had shown that she wanted him to come with her he would have entered into her mood, at least superficially. But because she did not want him, because she was finding a deep satisfaction in something that he did not understand and from which he felt excluded, he tried to spoil her mood and recapture her interest by underlining all the city's disadvantages. He would draw attention to the humid heat by commenting at length on the relief of the air-conditioned dining-room, conjure up the filth of the streets by meticulously examining his salads. And when he could draw no fire in answer to this sniping he unmasked larger batteries, the poverty and the hungry slums, the endemic diseases, the rapaciousness (according to Michael) of everyone.

But his negative approach only underlined her wish to

enjoy alone her different city. She did not argue, knowing it was too fragile to be analysed and could change in an instant to a tawdry boredom. But in the meantime the small split between them was widening, and seemingly taking with it all her previous life.

The long line of overhead fans (whose blades appeared to turn and tangle with each other, reflecting the chaos of departure below) poured down a stream of humid afternoon heat on the hurrying passengers. Women with fluttering saris and faces masked with anxious fear hurried behind shouting men, one hand steadying the pile of tin trunks and corded suitcases on their heads, the other dragging some screaming child with tear- and kohl-stained cheeks. Whole families jostled about the carriages, laughing or crying with equal candour. Amongst them pushed laden porters and the sellers of all articles that might be required for so long a journey, indiscriminately shouting their goods into the nearest person's face. On the fringes of the dense crowd men lay on the concrete, their faces covered with cloth, their arms covered with flies, and mockingly slept.

The long hours of the night were loosely strung on a cord of heat and sleep, knotted by noisy stations and the chanting cries of tea sellers. The daytime was even less well defined; a long drag of heat and dust, the whirr of fans and the smell of train. The endless plains swam past, palled with dust. Sometimes a jay flashed electric blue from the rise and fall of telegraph wires, vultures circled in the milk-blue sky, a flock of goats dashed a short distance from the train. Grey mud walls of huts patterned with drying cakes of dung whipped past the windows.

Whenever the train stopped, heat poured into the carriage with the whine of beggars.

She had not imagined such heat was possible. It was like a new and frightening element, sword-sharp to the skin and eyes and lungs. The whole of the back of her dress was soaked with sweat, wherever her hands touched there sweat would darken the film of dust. And yet there was a fascination about it; it seemed to burn time away whilst making it more burdensome, it numbed her mind and yet made her almost feel the cool wash of shadow as some thick-leaved tree rose and fell. It dragged sleep across her mind and then one of its burning fingers would awaken her. Each time they stopped Gopal came to her compartment in the corridorless train. He brought her oranges and water and the tasteless gritty meals; stood guard while some sweeper brushed away the worst of the accumulated dust. And sometimes Michael came, but the exhausting burden of heat and the fear that in his absence his luggage would vanish kept him from travelling in her compartment.

It was already dark on the evening of the second day when they changed at Muri to a narrow-gauge track and began the two-thousand-feet ascent to the Ranchi plateau. Sarah had tried to form a picture in her mind of what the country might be like. She knew that near Bandhu there were jungle-covered hills rising some fifteen hundred feet above the general level of the plateau, but somehow the interminable plains refused to leave her mind. All she could imagine was a mottled dusty-green greyness stretching as far as the eye could see, and from which Bandhu would eventually rise with the improbability of a mirage.

The next day they left Ranchi by car at one o'clock,

allowing four hours to cover the eighty miles to the south and an hour of daylight on arrival at the bungalow. She was filled with excited anticipation. Going to Bandhu was in the nature of a coming home, for there the name of Valmont had existed for nearly a hundred years, her own house and servants awaited her arrival, there would be strands of loyalty existing, perhaps even affection.

At the start of the journey were plains of chequered fields, level or gently terraced, prepared for the monsoon rice. Symmetrical hills of rock rose inconsequentially from these plains, which in turn sometimes gave way to stony uncultivated ground. As they drove south the country became more broken and its contradictions more pronounced. She sat half-turned from Michael, absorbed by the spectacular and paradoxical landscape, by the incessant change of scene against the immovable haze of the horizon. The hills, though huge, were scattered, and between them were broad vistas of burnt-out land, blue-shadowed by trees, veined redly by erosions. The burning air and the white glare of sun, the black rocks and the dusty fields sometimes hedged with cactus, spoke of an all-destroying desiccation. Yet this was denied by some luxuriant, banyan tree or a grove of dark green mangoes, a terraced waterfall of shrill young rice, haphazard, out of season, on a hillside. Sometimes too she would glimpse the white flowers, purple-streaked and orchid-shaped, of Bauhinea trees, the orange Flame of the Forest, the blue racemes of a Jacaranda. Sometimes the road crossed sandy river-beds where thin sheets of water still flowed but would surely fail before the rains in June.

There was a loud report. As Michael and Gopal started awake the Sikh driver theatrically jammed on the brakes of the lurching car and skidded into the dusty bullock-cart track by the edge of the macadam.

(III)

Gopal and the driver settled down to change the wheel with the time-destroying absorption of children playing with trains. A ratchet of the jack was broken, there was no tool to remove the hub-cap, bolts had rusted on to screws. It was Michael who bullied and interfered with the slow but brilliant improvisations that were going on; Sarah had a sublime confidence that the driver of a car, if a man, could not fail to bring order to mechanics.

"We shall be here all night," he told her in one of his frequent progress reports. "These bloody fools . . ."

"Oh, I don't think so. There's nothing I can do about it even if we are." He looked at her morosely and wiped his sweating face.

The sun was only a hand's breadth from the horizon and the hot wind had died before they started again, Michael tensed, waiting for the second puncture and a night of misery in the car. It was dark long before they left the main road and took a rough stone track towards the east. Two miles further on the driver said: "Bandhu," but Sarah could only see the black shape of huge trees and the gleam of fires. Then the track began to rise and a one-storeyed square of buildings showed blue-white walls and dull brown tiles in the moonlight. A hundred yards further, on the opposite side to the factory, the track finished and the headlights picked out a waist-high wall overshadowed by small mango trees. They turned into a short drive beneath a welcoming arch of withered leaves. The white bungalow faced them, an oil lamp gleamed in the deep veranda. There were two figures dressed in white shirts and dhotis at the foot of the broad flight of steps.

Near a corner of the bungalow three or four servants shaded their eyes against the lights.

She felt no shyness as she opened the car door, only pleasure that she was meeting someone who had known her father. A man stepped forward and bowed deeply, raising joined hands to touch his forehead.

"Good evening, Patras. I'm so sorry we're late but we had a puncture." He was not listening. She held out her hand and he touched her fingers fleetingly.

"*Jesu Marang*, memsahib. It is great happy to see you come to Bandhu." His voice matched his sunken and lined cheeks, the hollow-chested stoop of old age. His short dingy moustache and close-cropped receding white hair contrasted vividly with the dark mahogany of his skin.

"And this is your son, Johan?" She smiled towards a powerfully built young man who was twisting a bare foot into the loose gravel. She had pronounced the word 'Jo-han', and Patras corrected her.

"Jo-ahn. Yes, memsahib." He motioned to the young man, who stepped forward, bowing in the same manner as his father. Again she held out her hand and was briefly touched by calloused fingers.

She looked at him curiously as she asked one or two conventional questions. The old photographs she had seen in London had shown men with long bobbed hair and almost naked bodices, their faces so foreign and lifeless that it had been quite difficult to look on them as human. But Johan's hair was cut and parted in European style, its natural waves lustrously black. The curved base of his nostrils and the exaggeratedly thick but well defined lips were more Mongolian than negrito, and so was his chin, which, in comparison to the high cheekbones balancing the broad strength of his throat, was almost childish. His

eyes were his best feature, large and beautifully shaped, and even in this light she could see that his eyelashes were long and thick, curled like a girl's.

Yet while her mind recorded these details the barrier of his colour confused her. He was much darker than Patras, who in turn was much darker than Gopal. Johan was a deep black, even his lips were a dark indigo dusted grey. And this colour seemed to mask his face and his eyes and thoughts. Only the scuffling gravel betrayed that he was ill at ease and Sarah cut short her questions to introduce Michael.

It was a strange moment for Michael. He was dazzled by the lights of the car, and Johan's face, so intensely dark, was distorted by the shadows. Momentarily he was shocked by a sudden resemblance of Johan to Robert: the lustrous hair, the broad cheekbones, the firm and slightly turned-up nose, the generous mouth. And then the shock passed as Johan moved his head and Michael saw that Robert was extravagantly caricatured by Johan, the cheekbones too high, the nose flat and the nostrils too bulbous, the lips too thick and the chin negligible.

Sarah turned to Patras. "Will you show me the bungalow now, and then we can meet here tomorrow morning. What about the servants? You got my wire saying I would bring my own bearer?"

"Yes, memsahib. Two malis, a cook and his matey, and sweeper. If 'U'lk Sahib wants bearer I can get from Ranchi."

They mounted the veranda steps as they talked and turned left towards a doorway hung with thin metal chains. She saw Gopal and the driver unloading the car, while Johan stood on one side watching. White moths crawled on the headlamps; the night was very still, very hot; from the garden a cicada grated and stopped. A

far-away drum tapped. She wanted to linger on the veranda, afraid that the inside of the bungalow would be oppressive and disappointing.

But as she stepped through the chinking curtain she knew an immediate satisfaction. She remembered the searing heat of the afternoon, and this solidity would be its antidote. There was a softness too, of lamplight on bare white walls, liquid reflections from the simple mosaics of broken china set in the smooth concrete of the floor. And though there was only a long dark table set with four plain chairs, a black sideboard standing between the open doors leading to the back veranda, yet the room seemed furnished to perfection, filled with colour from the vase of scarlet and yellow canna lilies on the table, the walls and floor soft-rugged with a velvet heat. The height of the arched ceiling was broken by the broad punkah hanging above the table, its shadow huge on the far wall.

There were only two bedrooms, on either side of this central room, each having a minimum of furniture and the same style floor. They were smaller than the central room for the outer walls were immensely thick, insulating the bungalow and supporting the massive weight of the tiled roof. Part of the space was also taken up by wash-places leading from each bedroom.

"Where does that door go, Patras?"

"Into the compound, memsahib. For the sweeper to bring water."

And Sarah, glancing not only at the outside chatti of water next to the zinc tub but also at the wooden commode, understood and suppressed a smile.

The cookhouse was some twenty yards from the back of the bungalow, connected by a covered walk. She would have liked to have examined the series of inset charcoal braziers and lift the lids of the handleless aluminium

saucepans, but she thought that she had already delayed Patras long enough.

"I won't bother any more tonight, Patras, it all looks perfect to me. I don't know how long I shall stay, but some weeks, anyway, so there's no need for hurry. Will you come over in the morning?"

"What time, memsahib?"

"Oh, nine o'clock. Then you can take me over the factory. Have we got somewhere to put the car?"

"Yes, memsahib. Then the driver will sleep with other servants."

They said good night and she watched Patras get carefully into the car. Johan must have already left. She shaded her eyes as the car turned, watching its lights waver down the track and disappear past the far end of the factory. Moonlight splintered once more on motionless leaves, the sound of the engine stopped and the sound of silence flowed slowly back; the drum, the cicadas, bare feet moving in the bungalow, all softly muted, melting together in the silent heat. She stood still, her hands resting on the balustrade. To her right the compound was planted with small trees; she heard the sound of a twig break reluctantly beneath weight but she was not afraid, not even curious.

Michael joined her. For a moment he was tempted to tell her jokingly that Johan had faintly reminded him of Robert.

In the early hours of morning the moon-thrown shadows filled the compound. Behind the cookhouse a thick snake engorged a rat; from a clump of bamboos at the far corner of the compound a cobra slid with a susurrant of scale against dried leaf. In the village a drum still tapped, but the rice beer was finished and the tapper full of sleep.

Soon he would sleep leaning against the tamarind tree, indifferent to the mosquitoes and the black ants purposefully exploring the crevices of his flesh. Beneath the huge trees that hid the village there was a smell of wood smoke and the bitter stench of fermenting waste from the factory. There were other noises. The leathery flight of fruit bats circling the tamarind tree in which they roosted, the ghostly bubbling of nocturnal birds, the rabid malevolence of a jackal's terror-haunted cry. But behind the bolted doors of windowless huts men and women slept almost securely. Only drunken Mongra would dare to sleep outside.

Johan did not wake up in time to hear the jackal's cry, but the sound lingered in his blood and he knew what had aroused him. He watched a disc of moonlight as large as a silver rupee creep across the floor towards his face. He moved the smooth block of wood which was his pillow, for if the moonlight fell on his closed eyes it might stay there for ever, cloudy white cataracts. He thought of the day, the air of excitement, the white strangeness of Sarah. Of Michael he did not think at all, merely recording an impression of revolting ugliness, like most white men, and that with him the thin sour smell of bad buffalo milk was more pronounced than usual. But Sarah had smelt differently, had smelt like her appearance, neither attractive nor repulsive but unjudgeable. He remembered the cave and the hill. He folded his hands carefully between his legs, both for comfort and security, and slept again.

Sarah awoke in the middle of the jackal's scream. The shutters of the window were open and involuntarily she lifted her head, saw the low line of mango trees veiled by the mosquito net. Half asleep, quite ignorant as to the cause, the ferine madness lay on her tongue and she tasted fear. Only when fear had fully woken her could she rest

her head on the pillow again, take comfort from the filmy security of the net.

For a brief period before the first vestige of light a deep peace fell over the land and sleep became more profound. The tension of the night, pinpointed for survival, eased slightly as the desire for food and activity was replaced by the need for water and for sleep. Only insects and the smaller bats worked ceaselessly on.

But with the first ghostly light this peace dissolved, as the darkness drained back into the shape of tree and rock, back to this first piece of rising ground, those more distant hills. Into the silence fell the first liquid notes of birds.

Sarah opened her eyes and saw her window as a grey pearl of light. She listened sleepily to the sound of the birds, remembering long-forgotten bird song, forgetting it as these notes fell in a clear minor key, strange as the sound of coins minted from unknown metal. She slept again and when she awoke only lingering traces of freshness were left to the brazen day and the birds were silent.

She put on her dressing-gown and walked barefooted to the veranda. The bungalow faced due south, set on the side of rising ground sloping from east to west, raised some three feet on a foundation of packed stone and mortar as a protection against the tunnelling ravages of white ants. This elevation allowed Sarah a clear view over the low white wall enclosing the square compound and the stunted hedge of clipped hibiscus around the brown lawn on the left of the short drive. Beyond this the land fell away in a wide and shallow valley, irregularly patterned for perhaps a mile with the bunds of pale ochre rice-fields.

There was no sudden finish to this cultivation, it tailed off into scrubland. She could see large rocks, patches of stunted sal trees, an occasional dark green mass of a wild mango or a tall pyramid of a cotton tree. Then the land

dipped out of sight, reappearing again in the middle distance as a wide band of broken foothills to the mauve-shaded ridges distantly curving from east to south-west. Dominating this middle distance was a cone-shaped hill. It was too far to see more than its bare outline, steep and erect, with small patches of distance-darkened trees on its lower slopes. The falling lines of the shallow valley drew the eye to its symmetrical tip.

The rest of the view was cut off by the fruit trees which filled most of the compound. There were graft mangoes and lichee trees, their unripe clusters of husked fruit pale against the dark and glabrous leaves. There were guavas too with smooth grey trunks, and she recognised the waxy orange flowers of a pomegranate. The trees commenced some ten yards from the bungalow, forming an irregular but effective screen which hid the track and the factory. All she could see of the village was the tops of the massive shade trees a quarter of a mile beyond the orchard.

She turned again to the south, and its beauty changed the rhythm of her breath. The slanting sunlight streamed through the clearer blue, but towards the ground the finest dust would never settle until it rained, lying like a thin golden mist of early September. It touched the hills with vapour, and the underlying wash of colour from their jungled slopes hinted at a green coolness, at unknown paths wet with dew, paths once reached that would draw her on and on toward a glade or glades aslant with palms and blue golden light, and in the glade . . . from the back of the bungalow one of the servants began a long hoick. She moved her position carefully. A revolting sound, she thought, but at least I don't allow it to irritate me. Two months ago I should have forbidden such terrible noises near the bungalow.

She paused, consciously waiting to feel contentment.

Nothing happened. Contentment . . . happiness. . . . There was nothing except a lonely scene, the unattainable hills and herself looking at them, wanting a cup of tea, thinking about the factory, wondering how the post would arrive and whether it was time she received Emmanuel's weekly report, wondering what dress to put on for her first visit to the factory.

As she turned away, the cone-shaped hill, still bathed in a thick golden light, moved slowly against the clock.

"Did you sleep well, Sarah?" Michael cut round a mango and inexpertly began to twist one half away from the pear-shaped stone. She watched rich yellow juice mingle with sweat, beading his fingers.

"Don't eat too many of those, Michael, you'll get the most awful tummy." She glanced away. "I slept beautifully, except when something started howling."

"Did it? I hardly slept a wink, what with the heat and a bat in my room. And something always seemed slithering across the ceiling. Are there snakes here, Gopal?"

"Yes, sahib. Malis telling bad compound snakes, cobra snakes and others poisoning." Gopal seemed lethargic this morning and his English more ungrammatical than usual.

"Were you comfortable last night, Gopal?" Sarah asked.

"No, memsahib. No charpoy, sleeping on floor."

"What about the other servants?"

"Jungli. Not minding."

"Borrow one from Patras. And what are you doing about lunch?"

"Cook getting."

"Quite. But find out what, and if he needs money. You're in charge of the servants, Gopal, and if anything goes wrong it's your fault."

"Yes, memsahib." The prospect of superintending the cook's account lightened, but did not remove, his feeling of oppression.

"What's the programme, Sarah?"

"We'll look over the factory first and hear what Patras has to say. I've got those heat and arsenic experiments I want him to do for colour, and there's the question of air-conditioning the storage sheds—we're always having trouble with the lac blocking in the hot weather. Tomorrow you can start the plantation inspections. I think that's best, don't you? Patras will be over here in a few minutes." She put down her napkin and went to her room, shutting the door carefully behind her. The prospect of using the commode for the first time was rather daunting.

She heard voices on the veranda and crossed the room once more to the mirror propped on the table. Already sweat was showing through the carefully applied foundation of vanishing cream beneath her eyes. 'There'll be a landslide soon,' she thought, making a last attempt to repair the damage, knowing that it was futile in this heat. In Bombay she had accepted the difficulties of achieving any lasting make-up, but today she wanted to appear at her best. She touched up her mouth once more, ran an unnecessary comb through her shining hair and decided not to wear a hat.

As they left the veranda the weight of sun struck her without the counter-weight of a breath of air. Patras walked stolidly by her side carrying a pair of unlaced patent leather shoes. She was surprised that even he was sweating, although not as profusely as Michael, whose streaming face reflected the green pallor from the brim of his topce.

"That's your house, Patras," she stated, pointing to a small building attached to the near end of the factory. From the track it appeared deserted, the front door pad-

locked from the outside, the windows sealed with boarded shutters. A rough rectangle of aloes separated bare paddy-fields from the large compound, bare and stony save for a flamboyant tree whose thick branches and feathery leaves almost touched one end of the building. She saw that the tree was a mass of buds.

Sarah was familiar in theory with the layout of the factory; the long godowns enclosing the square concrete yard. The first side at right angles to the track was the storage shed. Then came machinery for crushing the stick lac and next to that the washing vats. For most of the year the lac was dried on bamboo mats spread over the courtyard, but, in the rains, half of the third side was used and the remaining half for the melting of the dried lac. The fourth, facing the track, was split in two by a covered archway. One half comprised the packing shed, the other a store-room for spare parts, cloth and various chemicals. It was also Patras's office.

She intended to see all this on the first day, then to give instructions for a series of experiments to improve colour and solubility. While these were being carried out she would look into the working of each department. That much was clear in her mind, and though the details were more vague it was sufficient to give her a sense of purpose. There was work to be done: and thinking of it in such general terms made it seem as though the coming weeks, all future time, would be satisfactorily filled.

(IV)

The first mutters of discontent from Michael and Gopal grew from day to day. Sarah was more concerned about Gopal for she did not want the trouble of getting used to a new bearer, and she was afraid Gopal would leave. He

complained of everything: the local rice was bad for his stomach, there was no daily market in Bandhu, the villagers would only sell their oldest or diseased chickens, and then at exorbitant prices. He said that the other servants hated him, that his wife was 'having troubles' in Bombay. But even if all this was true he had worked in Bihar before, had known to within a little what conditions would be like. He was earning good money and could soon go home.

But Gopal was far less at home surrounded by Mundas than he had been when surrounded by British troops. He and the Mundas regarded each other's humanity as something so contemptible as to be beyond pity. In Bombay he would have thought of their gods, their dark and malevolent cloud of spirits, as ridiculous. Here he was terrified. But if he had admitted his terror it would increase to a point beyond control, and so his stomach revolted, he slept badly, he blamed the rice and then half suspected poison. He seemed in the grip of a slow paralysis, and each day was becoming more querulous, apparently more stupid. Only in the actual presence of Sarah or Michael did he feel a lifting of the pressure and then, in a tortuously involved fashion, tried to irritate them into leaving Bandhu. He began to chew pan, knowing that its smell is offensive to Europeans, dress dirtily, sniff at mealtimes, hoick outside in the early mornings and blame the malis.

He certainly succeeded in goading Michael into fits of rage increasingly difficult to control.

But though she worried about Gopal she was not particularly irritated by him. Her attitude toward all non-Europeans (of which she was unaware and would have indignantly denied) was rapidly changing from her first sensitivity in Bombay. Of course they were ordinary

human beings, but . . . and there the shutter was beginning to fall, of a different civilisation, a different world (the more confusing seen from such close quarters), all reinforcing her instinctive feeling that humans were essentially unknowable. And reinforced it to a degree that now prohibited effort to penetrate their minds, made her accept their behaviour and idiosyncrasies as though it was all unjudgeable.

Michael she could judge, and his behaviour during this fortnight was exasperating. His irritation had been started by Sarah's air of detached withdrawal, but in Bombay it had been held in check by comfort and the thought that any day her mood would change. Since then his irritation had grown like a boil and was only prevented from coming to a head of violence by her presence. The constant sweating of his flabby body had brought on the maddening rashes of prickly heat and the unaccustomed quantities of fruit caused the inevitable diarrhoea which, once started, might stay for weeks. On the few days when he did not go to the plantations he moved carefully from the shade of the bungalow to the shade of the factory, sleeping heavily, sweatily, after lunch. He would lie awake long hours of the night, tossing and turning as he scratched his rashes.

He complained incessantly of his stomach, with that masculine trait of pretended stoicism which is the worst form of self-pity and peculiarly irritating to women, accustomed to the acceptance of regular and often severe pain. He also began to give her daily reports on the patches of prickly heat appearing round his waist and in his armpits.

"You probably don't wash enough," she told him. "Most men don't—being male more than makes up for a little thing like that. And I honestly believe they think bad breath is perfectly normal. But they'd never forgive you for mentioning it."

"Not at all. I've got prickly heat because I have to slog out to those plantations. Not that I mind, someone has to do it. I expect the food's to blame as well. Can't Gopal or the cook think of anything except curry and rice?"

"And mangoes . . ."

"It might just as easily be the water. Have you had a look in the well?"

"Yes. There was something very odd sitting on a piece of wood, a toad or something. So it must be all right. In any case it's boiled. My stomach's not upset."

And so on. Nor were his complaints made any the less irritating by being disguised as semi-humorous comment. "I'm getting to like my morning tea tasting of wood smoke." "Curried chicken *and* rice, what a surprise!"

He understood that he was behaving stupidly, every day alienating Sarah a little more, but he could not stop, and his inability to do so frightened him.

His most wounding shafts were reserved for the management of the factory. He knew that Sarah was over-loyal to all her staff, and that this was genuinely felt even if some of its roots lay in a form of self-flattery and a sentimental regard for her father's judgment. To attack Patras would be the surest way of piercing her indifference. It was also very easy.

Sarah herself presented him with an opening. She commented on the bitter stench that permeated the factory area, sometimes reaching to the bungalow. One evening a few days later Michael said: "I've investigated that frightful smell. All the water from the vats drains on to the sloping bit of wasteland. The insect bodies and muck goes with it, it ferments and everyone gets gassed. It would be simple for Patras to put down a drain for a couple of hundred yards to a dried-out gully. An open drain would do."

"Why doesn't he?"

"Oh, some business about the villagers. The insects are nitrogenous, as you know, so naturally where the water spreads out the soil is very rich. These wogs have cottoned on to that and take the top soil away for their fields. But that doesn't alter the stench and mess."

"It seems a reasonable explanation from Patras. I don't suppose anyone notices the smell except us."

"No, I don't suppose so. I'm not blaming Patras," he paused, "in any case it's been going on so long that the whole area is a sort of bog. It would take years to dry out. Of course Emmanuel or your father might have spoken about it before the war, and it slipped Patras's memory." There, he thought, you can have it any way you like. Daddy, Emmanuel, or Patras, but someone tripped up.

At the end of a fortnight Sarah began to realise the extent of her isolation. She had expected to find in Patras a wise old man who would become her friend, gossip about her father, create a sense of continuity with the past that might make the future seem more significant. Instead she found a muddled and somewhat tiresome old man. She had expected Gopal to look after her efficiently and cheerfully, but now whenever he came near she prepared herself for some complaint. Michael annoyed her more each day.

(V)

But it was easy to escape into the strangeness and power of Bandhu, for though it lies within the tropics there is nothing tropic-soft about Bandhu. Even the sky-blue days of winter glitter like rock crystal. And from March to mid-June the sun is a sword and the wind a scourge; the still

nights velvet pads of suffocation. The rocks melt, the iron ground trembles, earth and sky merge in an ochreous haze. The horizon presses nearer, hills recede; the sun no longer a white disc but a small and malevolent eye seen through a dusty burning-glass. By midday colour is sucked from the land into the sun and spat back, to shriek scarlet from the trumpet hibiscus, to eat into the eyes from an acid-green head-cloth. Even the small shadows of trees seem shadowless at midday, merely a darker heat.

Bandhu is a little cooler than the plains, far less humid than the ports. But the burning wind and a vast jumbled loneliness stretch the endurance of strangers to a point where elasticity seems destroyed. For some men (not, one would have thought, imaginative) it is the recurrent thunderstorms that start in April which add an almost supernatural poison to this time. Storms which brood all of one afternoon low in the west, while the sun, like a slow fuse, burns into the black kegs of cloud and the mass swells while the wind drops. In the sickly yellow-green light birds sit silent in silent trees, a wall of yellow dust grows in the west, keeps level with the line of black and thunder-shaking clouds. Behind the wall of dust is a grey-black wall of water.

It can be heard a long way off, a growing roar. The tall fountains of sirus trees sigh once and bow towards the east; the wind shrieks, the air is filled with flying dust and grass, then the wall of water. Thunder bursts at tree-top level, a terrible sound that liquefies the bones; arms are raised and heads lowered. Night comes with the storm. Lightning jerks, flares long minutes in blue rain-rods. And afterwards the heavy silence of dripping trees, tree frogs and cicadas.

Sarah did not know about the storms. It seemed impossible that the present order could ever be varied, so completely did it fill the land, so faithfully did the land

reflect it back. The burnt beauty of the country, the burning wind and malevolent sun were strange and exciting challenges to her, which a slow acclimatisation and renewed strength enabled her to meet. She hardly needed the spur of wishing to escape from the strained atmosphere of the bungalow.

She formed the habit of sitting for a short time after lunch in a deep cane chair on the veranda. It would be very silent then, with the servants lapped in the exhausted sleep of the East and no sound to drift from the factory. Only the breath-snatching wind in the orchard trees and beneath the caves, the plaintive whistle of a kite-hawk, the drone of a blue bee.

And yet, though no human beings moved, though at this hour colours were no longer colours, the landscape lived before her with a dancing hunger. Along the rail of the veranda wandered a wispy line of ants; then the leaves of mangoes and lichees flowed and shook, glittering cascades of green air, and twisting butterflies spiralled against the current, emerald-blue, swallowtail-yellow. The wind licked thin dust from the drive, blew from the bare falling paddy-fields like flat brown smoke. And where this discernible movement ended in distance the quivering and bent waves of heat rolled to the east and behind it the motionless hills and trees danced and swayed. And sometimes (so high above this turbulence) she would see the cool circle of a vulture over the cone-shaped hill.

Wide awake and yet half tranced, oblivious of the sun and wind and yet experiencing it totally, Sarah would be drawn into this world through the moving garden, along the pale rust track, into the blind village asleep beneath the green torrent of sun and wind, tamarind and peepul. Little paths led all ways from the edge of the village, petered out in a patch of withering chilis, slipping

behind some rising shoulder, ending in an eroded fissure.

She would choose a path at random. It was strange how quickly the village and the bungalow melted away. Sometimes she would glance back and feel a nerve move, as though she was a poor swimmer putting down her pointed foot and touching the abyss. But always, it seemed, the conical hill showed palest amethyst, floating above dark waving rock.

(VI)

Ever since the factory had started at Bandhu there had been an awkward arrangement of work every third week-end, when Saturday was a full working day and Monday was free. This was to allow the men and women to go on foot to Anpura, twenty miles away, and attend the big weekly bazaar held on Mondays. Half-hearted attempts had been made in the past for Patras to hold stocks of kerosene and cloth, salt and the country chewing-tobacco. But he could not stock the essential thing the Mundas wanted—sociability and the gossip of other villages, an opportunity for the women to wear their brightest saris and all their silver jewellery, for the men to wear white flowers in their hair, thread purple-headed clover through the pierced lobes of their ears.

Sarah had already spent nearly three weeks in Bandhu during which she had measured time by the creeping veins of scarlet and gold through the flamboyant tree in Patras's compound. But on this week-end family parties started out to walk to Anpura and then spend the night dancing and drinking. There was an air of gaiety and freedom which seeped into the bungalow and touched Sarah with sudden restlessness.

"Would you like to go to Anpura tomorrow, Michael?"

"Gopal says it's just a bigger and dirtier market than usual. It'll be vilely hot and I shall only want to go to the lavatory all the time."

They were sitting on the veranda and she thought how white and strained he was looking. "I think I'll go. I'll take Gopal and see if we can't get some fresh meat. Perhaps I can get something for your stomach, maybe there's a chemist or something," she added doubtfully.

"Thanks, Sarah. If you were asking me to go to Bombay I'd accept like a shot."

Once she had decided to go to Anpura it was inevitable that she should meet Father Depuyt, who never failed to visit the weekly market. He had spent eight years in Anpura and what had at first been undertaken as a duty was now almost his only social pleasure.

The bazaar was held on the edge of the town in an area shaded by palms and banyan trees. Where there was no shade flimsy bamboo stalls had been built. From the point of view of space and people there was no reason at all why they should have met, but the Mundas believe that isolated members of the same race not only want to but should meet each other, and the crowd of naked and excited children surrounding Gopal and Sarah herded them (hardly knowing that they did so) to the foot of the banyan tree where Depuyt sat cross-legged, drinking a glass of tea. He was talking to a man and his wife, whose excuse for a day of idleness was a handful of dried chilis spread out on a dirty cloth in front of them.

She had surrendered herself to the noise and the heat, to the crush of shouting men and women, the flies and smells and the dazzle of white dhoti-ed Hindus against black-fleshed and almost naked Mundas. As the cluster of children broke, their objective reached, she saw Depuyt

without at once realising that he was European. His white cassock splashed with shadow merged into the black and white pattern, his white face was masked by a black beard streaked lightly with grey.

He had seen her long before, coming slowly towards him through an alley-way of squatting sellers. Her fair hair had shown beneath the brim of her back-tilted planter's hat. Her mouth was startlingly red against her wet face.

He knew at once who she was. Patras had told him of the projected visit, the news of her arrival had reached him days ago. No one had spoken of her beauty because no one who had seen her had thought that she was beautiful. But Depuyt, who could count the number of white women he had seen in Anpura on the fingers of one hand, was shocked by her beauty. There was no desire and therefore no fear, only a sudden rolling back of time and a sensation that was almost gratitude. As the children parted he stood up and stepped across the cloth of chilis.

"Good morning, you must be Miss Valmont."

"Well, yes, I was, I suppose I am still, but my name is really Middleton." She smiled formally, still a little confused at hearing the unexpected name, at his strange appearance and foreign accent.

"Of course, how stupid. Patras told me that you were married, but he always refers to you as Valmont. My name is Depuyt, I run the Catholic mission here."

"Yes, Father, I did know." It was true and not true, but she forgot to wonder whether she had heard Patras speak of him or not as the strange word 'Father' still echoed in her mind, faintly depressing.

"How do you like India? You have arrived at the hottest time."

"Oh, I love it . . ."

'Now we are committed to ten minutes' platitude,' he thought, 'then we shall shake hands and part. I shall not ask her to the mission. In any case by the way she said "Father" she is a Protestant who might also dislike priests.'

But, all in all, Sarah was glad to meet him. It was a long time now since she had voluntarily wished to speak to people of her own race. That he was probably Belgian or Swiss added to rather than detracted from her immediate feeling that he was sympathetic. Somehow it pleased her that he should have been sitting on the ground, speaking the incomprehensible language so easily, behaving so naturally. She was envying him, thinking how fascinating it would be to talk to these people, to be accepted by them. As for his being a priest, that too seemed quite natural. To live in Anpura one would either have to be a priest, a Civil Servant or a lunatic. To live permanently, she corrected herself; although it was small and squalid there was a sun-rotted atmosphere which she liked.

"Do you see many Europeans here?" she asked. They were walking aimlessly through the shouting, watching crowd, each thinking the other had some destination in mind which would terminate their meeting.

"Hardly any nowadays. But other fathers visit me, and I go to Ranchi occasionally. During the war there were many troops, many visitors. I still hear from some of them, but only a few Christmas cards now." He spoke lightly, smiling. Sarah incorrectly read bitterness into his words.

"Oh, everyone had a good war who survived in one piece, except civilian women." She intended to be sympathetic, and Depuyt at once remembered that Patras had said something, a very long time ago, about the sahib's daughter losing her husband.

"Your husband was killed?"

"Yes . . . Father."

"That is very terrible. Now you are in Bandhu." And he thought how callous he must sound, but then acceptance was a law. He smiled to soften his words and she noticed that the hairs of his beard grew to the very edge of his red lips, that his teeth were as white as the teeth of the Mundas. He was taller than she and his face was fine-drawn, his nose slightly aquiline. But she could form no opinion of his appearance, did not even try, for the beard and the white cassock seemed to dehumanise him.

"Yes," she answered, glad that evidently he intended to leave the subject alone. "And that reminds me, I've got a patient in Bandhu. Mr. Huyelk; he's a very old friend of mine who works for me. His stomach's upset. Can I buy medicine in Anpura?"

Depuyt obeyed an impulse. "Quite impossible, unless you want to kill him. But I have an excellent dispensary. Is it dysentery?"

"No, just mangoes, I think, Father."

Depuyt watched the car turn out of the drive and begin its rough journey back to Bandhu. He was uneasy because he had lied about the medicine. It was so unnecessary, he thought angrily, all he need have said was that sulpha tablets were far better than the patent medicines obtainable in the bazaar. He wondered if the immediate penance he had imposed—the humiliation of asking for four annas in payment, the embarrassment of changing ten rupees into filthy one-rupee notes—was sufficient. On the whole not, because the penance had at once been cancelled by the pleasure with which he had agreed to her suggestion that she should come to tea in two days' time. But he was uneasy. He was afraid that at

some moment he had committed a grave sin. He brushed the thought of impurity to one side, it was nothing whatever to do with that.

All the afternoon his mind was disturbed, marring the cool pleasure of the thought that he would see her again. At four o'clock he went to the dispensary, a small room at the far end of the broad veranda. Already there was a crowd of patients squatting on the tiled floor, sansars as well as Catholics. It was easy to tell the Catholic women, for here in the mission compound they covered their breasts. So did the sansars when they were actually speaking to a European, but they were apt to be careless. Sometimes, he thought with amusement, their carelessness was not untouched with malice, for only well-shaped breasts tended to slip from beneath the fold of sari.

His first patient was the sansar girl Etwari. She had come to him a month ago with a round sore high up on her cheek at least an inch and a half in diameter. Untreated it would slowly spread, eat away the lower lid and almost certainly cause the loss of her eye. She had been one of the first on whom he used penicillin ointment, and now it was nearly healed. This week he expected to find the last small disc skinned over, but when he undid the bandage he saw the infection had begun again. He looked closely and found what he suspected, dried specks of cow dung at the edge of the sore.

Normally he would have shouted at the girl, shouted for her father and mother, threatened to beat them at the same time as he gave instructions for the beating of the girl. His shouting only meant that he considered the offence a grave one; there would be no beating nor was he truly angry, and this was clearly understood.

But today he felt a destroying rage and Etwari knew, and was afraid. Her heavy face seemed puffy with weight.

He could have struck her, and then the thought burned on his tongue 'Dung! she's only dung herself!'

It passed, a red flash. He lowered his head so that she should not see his shame, and in that moment he understood what his first sin had been. Sarah's presence had belittled these people in his mind; it was only to a European that he would have bothered to lie about the medicine, to the others he would merely have said: "Come with me." And his heart shrivelled with pity for these people, that they should have inflicted on them a traitor like himself.

(VII)

The visit to Anpura set a mark against time, hinted at change. And for that she was not ready. Over the preceding months she had regarded Bandhu as an end beyond which she did not wish to look; she had come to believe that it held a vague happiness for her, an elusiveness that was linked with her father and through him back to her childhood, that time unknowingly flavoured with the peace of sinlessness. A time that could only be viewed through the singing light and shadow in which some women pass their early womanhood, a sensory delight during which even corruption is still half innocence; a magic place at the edge of the forest. The starred meadows of childhood can still be seen, clear and safe and reassuring, but the forest is darkly beautiful, the deeper shadows and the stranger light beckons.

She turned her meeting with Depuyt into a private reason for extending her stay. During the next two days she often thought of him, but not as a man, nor as a priest. His importance lay in his ability to tell her about this country, and she cast him for the same role which Gopal

had successfully filled in Bombay, the role that Patras had failed to fill. There was no one else to whom Sarah could go except Johan, but he was in charge of the plantation coolies, and on the few occasions when she did speak to him he seemed curiously evasive. She could not decide whether he was stupid or painfully shy; perhaps it was only that his English, like Patras's, deteriorated greatly as soon as any subject other than lac was discussed.

She needed another interest, for by now she realised that all her organising ability would be inadequate to change the routine of the factory. It would founder on the rock of Patras's set mind, sink in the inertia she suspected in Johan, weighed down too by her own ignorance of local conditions, of the language and the mentality of the people. Only by a ruthless and wholesale clearing away could she succeed, and the effort was not worth while. Perhaps if the factory had been running at a loss she would have bestirred herself, but this was not the case. The methods in use were old-fashioned by some standards, but far in advance of others. It was the very uncertainties of the commodity, the gluts and famines that made it one of the principal gambling counters of the East, which deterred men with sufficient capital from setting up factories modern enough to monopolise the market. Moreover, new synthetic resins were a constant threat to lac in much the same way as synthetic rubber constantly threatens the natural product. It was only the fluctuating price factor and the continuous research at Government level which helped to keep a balance.

And over all this, pervading every thought and action, lay the heat and the wind and the country. Its very violence anæsthetised her from a realisation of its power, that already it had effected changes in her superficial outlook and behaviour. Sweat and dirt, the fly-encrusted

eyes of children, the fly-encrusted food, were now regarded as inevitable as the colonies of ants in the bungalow, the huge brown cockroaches that appeared each night in the bathroom, the mosquitoes and house lizards, the nightly invasion of bats. She even accepted the presence of scorpions, which Gopal hunted assiduously, fearing for his own bare feet, hoping to frighten Sarah by showing her the corpses gingerly arranged on pieces of lavatory paper.

She was concluding that these things could not be fought against. Her acceptance of this made it easier not to bother quite so much about her personal appearance, not to worry too much about the factory.

There was nothing else to occupy her purged mind. She had balanced the disadvantages of heat and wind and dust, of Michael's irritable complaints and Gopal's sullen lethargy, by being drawn to and allowing the strange beauty of the countryside to sweep over her. But the visual beauty staled a little each time she possessed it.

She smiled as she thought that Deputy, quite literally, was heaven-sent.

Because she had been taking less trouble over her clothes and face she enjoyed making a very careful toilet for her visit to Deputy. Unthinkingly she spoilt the severe effect of pale green tailored linen by pinning three heavily-scented double gardenias low on her left shoulder.

Deputy took in every detail of her appearance as he opened the car door. Her beauty cooled the fading wind and once more gave him pleasure. He had been prepared for her to bring Michael, and was glad that she came alone.

"You are very punctual," he said with a smile. They shook hands and the dust of the car floated past them. "I

shall tell your driver to put the car in the shade. Then my cook can give him tea."

She listened to his flow of Hindi as she mounted the steps. The veranda was much wider than her own; to one side was a table and she noticed, half disappointed, that it was laid for three.

"I see I'm the first," she said as Depuyt pulled out her chair.

"No. I thought Mr. Huyelk might come. He must be better by now if he did what I said." He turned his head and shouted: "Barnabas!"

Had he been asked? she wondered. The thought of Michael made her impatient. "His stomach's better, now it's prickly heat that's getting worse. He's stupid and scratches all the time."

"You should be more sympathetic. It must make him very . . . unsociable. I'll give you some powder, but tell him he mustn't scratch or it will turn septic. Then it can be quite serious."

A Munda servant edged through a beaded doorway carrying a tray of tea. He was fat, smiling with friendliness

In front of the veranda was flat ground sparsely covered with brown grass and a few shade trees. A group of boys had collected round the car beneath the feathery jacarandas. They pretended to examine the car but they were watching Sarah. Farther away was another group of larger boys, shouting and laughing as they played a chaotic game of hockey with home-made sticks. Beyond them she could see a long line of low red-tiled buildings. To her left, some fifty yards away, was a small chapel.

"You are an object of great curiosity to the school-boys," Depuyt said as he poured tea. "I doubt if they have ever seen anyone like you before. But you must be getting used to being stared at in India; intense

curiosity is one of the few things Indians and Mundas have in common."

"They do stare. It was bad enough in Bombay, but much worse here. Doesn't it get on your nerves, never to have any privacy?"

"I should be in the asylum at Kanke if I let it. It is bad enough for ordinary Europeans, but at least their bungalows and compounds are private. This is more public than the market-place, because they are curious about me. I would not have it otherwise, for many reasons." He absent-mindedly moved the plate of coarse bread, the bowl of melting tinned butter, near to her.

"Why? And why should they be so curious about you?"

"You hardly meet anyone in India who isn't interested in some form of religion. On a bus, in the bazaars . . . wherever they go they talk religion as the English talk about the weather. Naturally we priests are objects of far greater interest than the so interesting sahibs themselves. And in one's own parish it is much worse. They soon detect your failings in small matters and wait like vultures for the larger ones. That is so all over the world, and particularly for Catholics, who make large claims about their private lives. But in a way curiosity is helpful; constant surveillance is quite an aid to holiness!" He laughed ironically.

"But your own congregations are loyal."

"Yes and no. Out here more than in Europe, I think. Usually loyalty is only a form of pride. *My* priest should not do this because it reflects on *me*. That's all. So in general men and women keep silent about their priest's failings and then double their offence by thinking how good they are to avoid the sin of scandal." He paused, and inconsequentially Sarah asked how many boys were in the school.

"About a hundred and fifty. But the school is only secondary, my main work is to look after the Catholics in my parish."

"Are there many?"

"About three thousand. But scattered over eight hundred square miles. I have just finished touring now; after the monsoon I shall start again."

"Are all the boys here Catholics?"

"Oh, no! Most of them are Hindus. You can see the difference in that group by the car. The ones wearing dhotis, with light skins and finer features, are Hindu. So are most of the people in Anpura. Mundas still dislike towns, even as small as this. Anpura is made up of grain merchants, cloth sellers, metal workers. Mundas don't keep shops, they are passionately devoted to their villages and uneconomic bits of land, they can only think of existence in terms of being Mundas, they are very sorry indeed for you and me. The picture is changing slowly, although compared with the past I suppose the changes of the last hundred years seem incredibly quick. But I often think the Mundas are still not properly awake, in spite of having been kissed by two Prince Charmings—the Church of Rome and the British Empire." His laugh came back, a faint echo, in the uncomprehending smile of the group of boys.

"Some of them didn't wake up at all to the Church's kiss," she said, thinking of Bandhu. "I'm not trying to be rude, of course, but I can't really see why any did at all. Why some and not others?"

"What a difficult question. Let me give you some more tea while I think about it." It was not time to think that he wanted but time for his instinct to decide what sort of answer she could understand. He heard himself say: "No, I am pompous. No one could answer your question. But

leaving aside the grace of God there were excellent reasons why so many thousands did wake up. All these tribes on the Ranchi plateau are the original inhabitants of India. In prehistoric times they were driven from the rich plains to the jungle-covered plateaus of here and central India by invasions from the north. Helped by a slowly changing climate they managed over the centuries to make large areas productive. As these plums ripened, so different rajahs, Hindu or Moslem, moved in and picked them, exacting tribute—blackmail—and of course the pressure increased until it was insupportable. It remained insupportable for many many years. It was a brilliant young Belgian Jesuit, some seventy years ago, who was chiefly responsible for obtaining justice. Naturally it is said that the mass conversions to Catholicism that took place then were only a form of hysterical gratitude. But that is a gross over-simplification. Other missions, Anglican and Lutheran, were already established and working on the same lines long before that. We were not, either as Belgians or Catholics, favoured by the British in any way, I assure you, nor were our laws relaxed to suit primitive people. We have gone on increasing ever since. But I think the best argument in favour of some mystery taking place is the very fact that at least half the people concerned never even considered changing their religion.” He paused and glanced at her.

“I don’t think it’s very mysterious. I expect they were just like me. I’m glad I don’t believe in God; I hate hating people. And I could only hate God for allowing evil and suffering to exist. I’m simple. I can’t split my mind and believe in an omnipotent God permitting cancer.”

He smiled, strangely. “How lucky you are!” And it was not the words but the note of envy in his voice which shocked Sarah.

"Why do you say that? I don't feel sorry for myself, but I certainly don't think I'm particularly lucky."

He raised his cup slowly and drank before he spoke, rejecting one by one the involved intellectual arguments of his training. "If you don't believe in an ultimate good you almost certainly dismiss the idea of an ultimate evil; only deranged people believe they are irretrievably doomed to some form of damnation. Therefore I presume you only believe sin is what you personally think is sinful: you probably consider it a shocking sin to maltreat a child so as to maim it for life. No one, I mean no one like you or me, ordinary people, go about doing things which shock us profoundly and that we know to be evil. We do what we do because we think it is a good." He was speaking slowly, afraid of the snare of words, trying to express a central mystery so that she might possibly understand. "I daresay people who write disgusting anonymous letters think they're doing good, believe that even if what they say isn't true it very easily could be, so it's better to get it in first. So, you see, I envy you. For what could be more pleasant than going around not only doing what you want to do, but what you believe is good? You must be very happy!"

'It's true,' she thought. 'I don't think I've ever done anything which I knew and believed to be wholly evil. I've always had a justification.'

"Oh, but it doesn't quite work out like that," she said, "about happiness, I mean." She was hesitant and confused. "Anyway, you still can't laugh cancer off."

"No," said Depuyt, almost casually, "you certainly can't. I've yet to hear of anyone who did. Nor wars—not any form of suffering. Some of the greatest intellects of all time, men who certainly believed in God whether in a Christian or non-Christian form, never answered that question. I personally don't see why we should expect to

find the answer yet, for the world is not completed at any level, even the unchanging hills change incessantly. Our Lord Himself gave a categorical warning as to the problem of good and evil when He said that the rain would fall on the just and unjust. Of course we do have free will and can carry an umbrella."

"I couldn't agree more," she said eagerly. "We certainly have free will. It would be . . ." and her hand moved in the air as she once more felt confusion, an inability to express her sudden stifling revulsion at the thought that she was not free but only some puppet jerked by chance and time.

'Dear Lord!' Depuyt thought expletively, 'If I ever have the chance I shall ask you some very sharp questions.' He looked at Sarah's face, but it told him nothing except that she did not understand what it was she was talking about. Poor child, to carry the burden of so much beauty; and poor child, too, to have God poured down her throat instead of tea. He smiled.

"There! This serious talk has made your gardenias wilt. Come and look round the compound and we shall find some more. The schoolboys might even have left me some guavas. I have a Japanese variety which Providence has flavoured in a way not entirely to their liking but greatly to mine."

The garden was at the back of the bungalow and he led the way down the veranda steps to a side gate. The boys drew back from the car. He spoke in Hindi to one of them: "Ananda, ask Barnabas to give you a small basket and then come with me. Hurry."

Even taking Ananda, a fifteen-year-old Hindu whose theoretical knowledge of sex was only a degree more certain than his practical experience, would not stop scandal. Nothing, he reflected, would stop that; from the

minute he was seen speaking to her in the market-place he was already sleeping with her in the minds of most of Anpura. Even if she had left at once for Ranchi and never returned, even if they had merely nodded to each other, Anpura, whose belief in magic was as certain as tomorrow's dawn, would believe that they had rendezvous-ed in the upper air. Or would they, in their heart of hearts? Always that last uncertainty, that impenetrable core of all humanity, impenetrable because its essence was not human. And here, in India, that essence was more diversified, touched life in a more general way, had been responsible for the theory that the East is mysterious. Rendezvous-ed in the upper air . . . with the ease of strength he wiped out the train of thought and began to show Sarah the etiolated coffee bushes beneath their thick shade trees. And as they walked the red brick paths, past cabbages and portulaca, peach trees and pink lilies, she noticed that his Flemish accent grew more harsh.

There were rows of peas and dwarf beans, carrots and okra, shallots and garlic. Between the rows were irrigation trenches, some dry, some full of brown frothy water. She could hear a rhythmic squeak and splash and when they came to the centre of the garden she saw a square well half hidden behind the emerald fronds of bananas. Two malis worked a weighted bamboo pole, pouring the water into the branching trenches.

"Does the well ever run dry?"

"Never. It is one of the extraordinary things about this country. Where the land is flat enough to be worth cultivating there is nearly always diggable water, yet the people hardly irrigate at all. That's why I have this big garden, to show what can be done with proper manuring and water. The boys have one period a day working here, at least the boarders do, and most of the vegetables go to

them. But in spite of being taught, in spite of eating the results and liking it, when they go home nothing happens."

"Even among the Catholics?" They smiled at each other.

"Obviously you know nothing about Catholics. Yes, of course."

"But why?"

"Human nature. Habit. Dislike of change. Many reasons. But after all," he added, smiling again, "the Mundas are not the only people with rather unaccountable habits over vegetables."

By the time they had picked the gardenias and guavas the wind had died away and the sun was preparing to set. The brick paths glowed in the coral light and heat flowed from the ground. "It will be quite dark in three-quarters of an hour," he said. "I am not trying to get rid of you, but the last bit of track to Bandhu is very bad. I will get some powder for Mr. Huyek's skin."

She walked slowly to the car and waited for him. The boys now edged a little closer. They answered her brief smile by smiling at one another. Depuyt crossed the drive and gave her a pill-box of powder.

"The next time you come I must show you the school and the chapel." He spoke with a cheerful assurance as though another visit was inevitable. He wanted her to come again and yet he did not care. He understood completely the latent danger of seeing too much of this woman, was already aware of the pitfalls, the grossest of which was to permit himself to be tempted in order to enjoy the pride of resisting temptation.

And now, watching the car turn out of the drive, he resisted other temptations, pride that he had not tried to impress so attractive a stranger by speaking of the asceticism of his life and its hardships (even by the most

subtle of hints), nor referred either to the loneliness of Anpura or to the fact that he would never return to his home. He resisted a sudden impulse to turn to the chapel and kneel before the Presence for reassurance. To do that at this moment was unnecessary, almost religiosity. Later he would go, before he must expose himself to the arrow of his sleep. Now there was work to do, there would be a group of patients marshalled by Barnabas near the cook-house and already he was late.

As he stood in the dispensary, swabbing out discharge from a child's ear and giving instructions to the mother, he was emptying out his mind of the afternoon, ceasing to wonder whether his approach to Sarah's sickness was good or bad. No one could help her; only the grace of God. He smiled happily as his mind repeated the word 'only'. He thought that he must be catching the habit of understatement from his temporal rulers.

In the lurid light Johan squatted beneath the flamboyant tree. Occasionally he could hear Birsa snap a stick for the fire. By the time it was dark the rice would be ready and Birsa would have returned to the security of the village. From long habit his mind returned to the forbidden subject of the hill and the cave. He leant his body forward, balancing on the balls of his feet, blurring the ground with almost closed eyes, pressing his extended arms heavily on his knees. But between him and the cave were the white eyes and angry voice of Huyelk Gomke.

Why had he chosen today, was it because he knew that the memsahib had gone to Anpura and would ask the Father questions? Did he know what was in his mind—and his own father did he know too? The questions slowly melted into one another, forming a black

weight which held him, gently rocking, to the ground.

It was almost dark when he heard his father's slow steps. He froze, and at once the thicker darkness beneath the tree hid him. In the distance he could hear the car returning, and then the hedge in front of him shone and the shadows of the branches and leaves rushed towards the car. Then the darkness was absolute, save for the smell of dust.

He rose to his feet. His shirt and shorts were grey-black in the darkness. He took them off, leaving only the grimy scrap of cloth that passed between his legs and was held by a loop of string around his waist. He rolled his clothes into a ball and put them at the foot of the flamboyant. Then, with cold excitement, he jumped the low hedge and crept cautiously past the bungalow.

He took the footpath leading towards the plantation and the hill. But very quickly the darkness filled him and his steps faltered.

(VIII)

Sarah's enjoyment of her visit to Depuyt arose partly from a feeling of relief. She had been half afraid that he might suddenly expose a hidden hatred for the country and the people which would have been directly opposed to what she wanted to hear. It would be so easy for him to poison everything by showing such hatred, for she vaguely understood that her first intense pleasure only rested on a frame of mind propped up by novelty and a spectacular beauty.

But everything had fitted in with her mood, although as to what he had actually said, particularly while they spoke of religion, she could recall little. It was more a remembrance of the fluency with which he spoke both Hindi and Mundari, the harshening of his accent as he showed her

the garden, that told Sarah of Depuyt's contentment with the externals of his life. She wondered if he was internally so contented. She supposed that he must be, and she found this surprising for she had never before associated religion with human happiness. Even the beatific visions and ecstasies of saints seemed shot through with morbidity to Sarah.

But with this she was not concerned. She had enjoyed talking about religion, but her enjoyment would have stopped at once if he had made the slightest attempt at conversion. (Yet she was a little piqued that it was he who had ended the topic. After all, he was a missionary.) Religion was now regarded by her as somewhat similar to opera or exhibitions of Old Masters at the Academy, something to which she could only refer in terms of "I don't know anything about it, of course, but I know what I like." Something which bored her. In the case of religion she thought that her boredom would be total, for at least some music and pictures gave her a deep if fleeting pleasure. But to consider religion in other than academic terms (as an infection which other people caught, like infantile paralysis and almost as blighting) was immediately depressing, taking away all warmth.

During the next few days she continued to think about Depuyt often. He was, after all, as new and strange to her as the country itself; he was also the only person to whom she had both access and the wish to communicate. But underneath this was the knowledge of Depuyt's happiness, and because he was happy her thoughts were enviously drawn to him and she wished to see him again. And still deeper in her mind was the seed of an idea that if she imitated his external way of life she too might find happiness. But that grain was so pressed on by contradictory influences that it was not so much a thought as an emotion.

A few days later she decided to take Depuyt at his word and drove to Anpura at tea-time. He was sitting in a chair on the veranda when she arrived, and squatting on the floor in front of him were three Munda men. Between them were little heaps of unhusked rice.

Sarah felt no guilt at calling unexpectedly. She was certain that if her visit was inconvenient he would say so. She apologised without embarrassment and offered to come back tomorrow.

"No, no. It is quite all right. I have nearly finished giving my views on what rice these men shall sow in June. Just another ten minutes . . .? Have a look at the school."

She was somewhat self-conscious as she walked across the compound and the boys stopped playing with their stone marbles or whipping the hand-carved tops and ran towards her. But shyness kept them at a distance. The school did not interest her, a long line of eight large rooms now empty except for blackboards and the rows of little bamboo mats on the floor with battered text-books neatly stacked in front. She began to stroll towards the only other building in the compound, the chapel. Believing that her visit was for prayer the boys pretended that they were not watching and returned to their games. But as she approached she felt reluctant to go inside, thinking that they were surreptitiously watching and expecting her to enter. And at the same moment she saw the three almost naked Mundas walking one behind the other down the drive. She turned towards the bungalow.

And soon she was asking Depuyt questions about the everyday life of the villagers, hearing about their passion for brilliant colour, for the sound of drums to which they would dance all night, the rice beer of which they complained they could never afford enough, their courage in the day and terror of the night. He told her a little of

their marriage customs, and of such trivialities as how the women prepared their one main meal a day. Of their medical knowledge, that strange and often lethal jumble of magic and skill; stories of hunting and legends of the sun, of the loveliness of the distant mountains to the south. And as he spoke she felt the country and the people stir a little; very dimly she could see this life as part of a whole and not as an isolated dream which would no longer exist once she herself had left. She was at peace and so absorbed by Depuyt's words that she even forgot the heat.

When she was about to leave, Depuyt asked her how long she would stay in Bandhu.

"Oh, I don't know. Some time yet: I like it so much I'm thinking of sending Mr. Huyelk back to England and staying on."

He laughed. "We're not through April. Watch out for the sun, you will have to be very strong to last until the rains."

It was after this second visit that Sarah began to act a counterpart of what she imagined Depuyt's external life to be. Her admiration of him did not make her wonder whether his inner life might be worth copying, for her repulsion was coupled with her ingrained attitude that everyone was entitled to think as they wished. (It was not true tolerance, only a device to avoid thought.) If Depuyt thought in terms of an omnipotent God, that was his business, but to her it smacked of a morbid weakness and she wanted no part in it. Besides, he was only representative of one religion; there were so many that their very numbers seemed to cancel out each other. Nor was it necessary, she decided, to believe in any god in order to be good. Even the word good was distasteful, belonged to the school of gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild. She preferred to use the word 'sensible'.

She could see now that immediately after the loss of Robert she had been sensible and had overcome her misery. Then she had stopped being sensible and another form of misery had come, worse than the first because eventually it brought a poisoned emptiness which drink and sex had only exacerbated. And then at the end of her search for Robert had come Conrado, bringing with him something which she did understand. Since then her loneliness and emptiness, though still present, had seemed less acute. She supposed, vaguely, that it was partly because now she had given up hope for Robert, partly too that she had been sensible, had tried to fill her mind with weightier matters than the seemingly inescapable social pattern of alcohol and men, and had been cut off ever since her illness from a past which always lay in wait to reclaim her.

She groped for the answer as to why Conrado had become a landmark in her life. It was not so much that she had forgotten—it was impossible for her to remember.

But all this thought was in the nature of a groping, a picking over in the dark of tangled memory traces, traces which themselves dissolved and re-formed with time and the processes of mind and body. Her pale imitation of Depuyt was not a reasoned one. It was partly started by the accident that they were, from her point of view, each other's only neighbour, their isolation was similar, her workers duplicated in miniature his congregation. She did not even express to herself the envious thought that if he could find happiness here, so could she. But she did tell Patras to review the factory wage scales. And the malis were instructed to start a compost heap and begin growing vegetables.

One result of this mood was to widen still more the gap with Michael. By now he had given up his earlier attempts to mask with facetiousness his hatred of the country, the climate and the people. Sarah, who did not understand the terrible exasperation of his inflamed skin, saw his behaviour as a mixture of ill-breeding, pettiness and possibly a malicious attempt to spoil everything for her as well. Normally she would have spoken out, but now she treated him with what she called patience but was in fact contempt edged with a certain cruelty. He was, after all, her paid employee, and though she never considered dismissing him, yet if he found Bandhu unbearable he could, and should, return to London. She wanted to be alone to throw herself into this role of a secular Depuyt, to learn at first hand something of the lives of the people of Bandhu, of other villages, to penetrate this land, to see beyond the first ridges of hills which barred the south.

As the days passed and his complaints increased with the spreading rashes, so she became more chillingly polite. In the bungalow he controlled himself from giving way to the worst excesses of physical anger, afraid of provoking a quarrel which nothing would heal. He chose instead to let his fury bleed during the hours spent with the plantation coolies. Each morning when he left the bungalow a part of his mind (strengthened even by the inadequacy of his sleep) urged him to be patient, while another part savoured in advance the inevitable incident on which he would pick to excuse the rush of rage. By the time they reached the plantations his sweat would have turned his skin into an unbearable shirt of Nessus; any incident, any misunderstanding, was an adequate excuse. And Johan's nameless fear of him, the coolies' deferential submissiveness, only encouraged him to press the harder. He found

an unclean pleasure in their ignorance of what he sometimes shouted at the top of his voice or whispered with a dead smile, torrents of obscenities and unspeakable insults.

Johan's position as overseer, his fear and apparent perversity at not being able to understand even simple questions unless connected with his immediate work, made him the obvious target. But it went deeper than that. Michael no longer knew whether Johan had genuinely reminded him of Robert or not. Now when he thought of one he would think of the other. And sometimes, in the furnace of the middle afternoon, with the burning sun and terrible wind reddening his exhausted mind, he deliberately tried to hallucinate himself that the black face into which he shouted was Robert's. But he never succeeded; rising above his frenzy was the knowledge that he was only a weak and despicable fool. And, in a way, that was his justification.

Fortunately he did not realise that he could have abused these patient men far more cruelly. There were centuries of oppression in their blood, oppression which had helped create love for their unchanging land, loyalty to each other and their way of life. Let him rave, it was of no importance. Later, in the evening, they would mimic him with shouts of laughter. And the sun god was already punishing him, he was sick with the sun.

And so no one was surprised when, late one afternoon as they were returning, he suddenly reeled awkwardly, humorously, to the side of the track and crumpled among the stones.

It occurred to none of them, not even Johan, that here was an opportunity for some slight revenge. They were certainly not displeased and a few of them made laughingly derogatory remarks about his smell. But they carried

him very gently back to the bungalow, shading him from *Sing Bonga's* further anger with boughs of leaves.

He was sleeping restlessly when Depuyt arrived in the car two hours later. Sarah met him on the veranda, worried in case Michael's collapse was the start of some tropic sickness.

"Has he complained of feeling unwell in the last three days?"

"He's done nothing else, but only about his skin. I've asked Johan, but he said the Gomke was no 'hotter' today than any other day."

"Can you send for him while I look at Mr. Huyelk?"

It did not take Depuyt long to decide that Michael was probably suffering from a form of sunstroke and heat exhaustion. His temperature was 103°, and Depuyt pursed his lips as he began to undress him and saw the state of his skin. Whole areas had been scratched raw, and beneath the scabs were pockets of watery pus. Sarah came into the room followed by Gopal and Johan.

"*Jesu Marang*, Johan."

"*Jesu Marang*, Gomke." The formal greeting fell softly in the darkened room and Depuyt began to raise his hand, expecting Johan to kneel for his blessing. But he did not kneel and Depuyt, thinking that he was shy, checked his gesture.

"Can your bearer help me sponge him down? I'll join you later."

When they were alone Depuyt spoke to Johan in English. "Was the Gomke complaining of sickness today?"

"Yes, Gomke."

"What sort of sickness? Stomach, head?"

"Gomke not speaking sickness."

"Johan," Depuyt said in Mundari, "what has happened to your English? You used to speak much better. It is most important for you."

"I get no practice here at all . . . there are only sansars." He turned his head quickly to one side.

"You have books; I will talk about it later. And don't use that tone of voice when you speak of sansars. Now, about the Gomke." Gopal came back and Johan looked nervously at Depuyt. "They do not speak our language, Johan. Why are you afraid?"

"He has been angry with me, with all the coolies. Raving like a mad spirit. And so the sun god struck him."

"Sun god?" Depuyt queried haughtily.

"That's what the coolies say." And he smiled, or tried to smile.

"Has he been drinking any bad water?"

"No, he brings water with him, I carry it, and his food. He has been angry off and on all the time, but this last week really bad . . ." Once started, Johan was difficult to stop, pouring out a confused story of Michael's behaviour, and Depuyt listened and felt ashamed. He had occasionally seen the pathological anger that afflicts so many Europeans in the East, the terrible and endless ravings of the master against the servant, degrading and exhausting.

"You must take no notice, Johan. The Gomke has been ill and I think now he will leave Bandhu. It is finished." He began to sponge the hot skin. Michael shuddered and opened his eyes. He was muttering, and Depuyt heard 'Robert' followed by a jumble of words which he knew were obscene. "You can go now, Johan. You have nothing to fear, I will speak well with the memsahib." For some reason he wanted to separate Michael and Johan, but this was so tenuous that he thought he was merely

trying to spare Johan embarrassment if he had to look at a naked European. In spite of the men's breech clouts and the women's exposed breasts their modesty is fanatical.

"I don't think there is anything seriously wrong with him," Depuyt said as they sat on the veranda. "A bad touch of sun and the prickly heat has become septic. He has a temperature."

"But he's been so careful, wearing a topee all the time."

"The eyes are more vulnerable than the back of the neck. And he's been rather . . . excitable these last few days."

"I thought he had been quiet, morose."

"Well, perhaps I mean irritable. This is the worst time of the year for everyone, and the heat brings out many bad qualities, like a poultice. I think he has taken a violent dislike to Johan, which is silly. Naturally, Johan is nervous and ill at ease with you both, and his English has deteriorated greatly. But I see so little of him. I must do something about Johan, life must be very difficult for him in a sansar village and also as the son of the manager. Has he been very slack or stupid?"

"Michael says so. I'm not awfully satisfied with him, but then I haven't had much to do with him. I've been meaning to see more, and now I shall. What do you suggest we do about Michael?"

"I think he will get over the sunstroke in three or four days, but the prickly heat is another matter. Powder is useless now, the only cure is to stop sweating—go somewhere cool. To the hills, Darjeeling or Naini Tal. Can you spare him?"

"Easily. I can stay on here and when he's better he can fly back from Calcutta. It's time one of us was back in London."

The next morning Michael was worse. Sarah divided her time between the factory and his bedroom, she and Gopal taking it in turns to sit by his bed and control his delirious tossing, sponge down his body, force him to drink quantities of weak fresh lime juice. It was during one such spell, as she felt the embarrassment of an unwilling eavesdropper, that she heard the muttered obscenities and Robert's name. But before surprise could change into a furious resentment Johan's name was substituted. And so it went on, first Robert, then Johan. It was like a scene between lovers who, incompatible, prefer the bitter futile quarrels to separation.

In the afternoon she sent an apologetic note to Depuyt, asking if he would come again. It was he who thought of moving the dining-room table to one side and putting Michael's bed in its place. Then he arranged for boys to sit in turn on the back veranda and pull the heavy punkah. Depuyt was fetched each afternoon, and on the fourth day Michael's temperature suddenly dropped.

A few days later he was allowed to sit on the veranda in the evening. His illness had purged both him and Sarah of nearly all their rancour; their attitude was now that of guest and host at the end of a too long and strained visit, when the relief of parting is like a return of friendship. It was this which made it possible to mention what she had intended to ignore, for she had not forgotten his delirious talk and her curiosity was great.

"But that's nonsense, Sarah. You know I was devoted to Robert. Still am."

"That's what I thought. But, honestly, the things you said were dreadful, as if you hated him in the same way as you seem to hate poor wretched little Johan."

Michael laughed uneasily. "But I was delirious all the time. I often think of Robert, and having so much to do

with Johan lately I muddled them." He paused, but she did not seem convinced. "If you really want to know, there is an explanation, sort of. . . . The very first time I saw Johan, when we arrived in the dark, I thought for a second that he was like Robert. Of course it's absolute nonsense, but I *did* think that. You know, high cheekbones, wavy hair, faintly similar nose. Johan is a sort of hideous caricature of Robert, that's all."

Sarah was silent. She had never studied Johan's face as she might have studied a white man's, to catalogue him as attractive or not. What Michael said was in a way true, though it would not have occurred to her. He was speaking again, ". . . just a trick of the light. You're not angry are you? It does sound rather bloody."

"Don't be silly, Michael. It couldn't matter less."

Now that he was better he did not want to leave. But Sarah, using his health as her lever, was adamant. It was eventually arranged that he should stay in Darjeeling for a fortnight and then return by air. For Michael it was a defeat, inexplicable and frightening. He promised himself that he would deal with it. But when he was better, back again to London.

Five days later she watched him wave from the car, smiling brightly through the dust shredding and vanishing in the wind.

She sighed with heartfelt relief and wandered into the bungalow. It was a delight to be alone, to savour in advance the peace of the coming days. Everything was returned to its proper place, the swish and creak of the punkah was stilled, only the door curtain chinked and the hot wind sighed.

She stood, only her eyes moving, trying to imagine the

sensation of this room once she had gone and the bungalow was again shuttered and locked; tried to imagine what that had been during the past years. A house lizard creaked from the wall, the whistle of a kite-hawk died reedily away. Solitude. Non-existence. . . . Only this season of heat, then the cloudy months of rain, the clear drenching days of winter sunshine. There was a deepening calm, a confusion of time that was no confusion but a clarity, dissolving to a point where she would know emptiness as this room knew it. Her mind reached out to grasp and it was gone. . . . but her mood lingered all that morning, a voluptuousness of solitude, a singing heaviness as though she awaited the coming of an accustomed lover. It was unbroken even as she walked about the factory and talked to Patras. She was at peace, lapped in by the burning day. And after lunch, almost drugged by her mood, she went to her room and lay on the bed.

Her thoughts wandered; tomorrow or the next day she would go with Johan to the plantations. She smiled as she remembered that Johan was meant to resemble Robert. She turned her head slightly on the pillow, half opening her eyes as though he was beside her and had whispered. That was all she required to make this solitude absolute; Robert's living presence. She closed her eyes and imaged him. Strangely enough the interval of years made it easier to recall his appearance. Her physical lassitude, drowsiness, the very heat of the afternoon, made it seem as though they had just completed the act of love, were both washed in the remembered tenderness, safely armoured with a perfect intimacy, as face to face on the pillow they gazed into each other's eyes, the dilated depths luminous and unknowable, edged with flecks of living colour. In a moment fingers would touch her scar.

But once more as she reached out for the intangible she

was left with nothing, only a crystal-clear image of Robert's face and the remembered ghost of the ghost of their love. A heaviness pressed on her, an empty heaviness, only the empty house, the sound of flowing leaves, a trickle of sweat across her throat. She slept, and when she awoke the day still burned sullenly and beneath her peace was restlessness.

She decided to call on Depuyt, but the car had not yet returned from Ranchi. Instead she walked along the plantation track, returning as the sun sank towards the layered dust on the horizon. She wandered through the garden, touching the swollen but still hard mangoes, saw the first blush on the green-husked lichees. Then past the clump of bamboos where the cobras lay greyly coiled in the empty catacombs of the white ants, their throats pulsing quickly in the baking blackness. Past the servants' quarters, the cookhouse and the well. She sat on the veranda, reading until her eyes ached and the night began to bubble out of the ground, swamping the trees in the compound. Green fireflies moved erratically and cicadas rasped.

Gopal brought a lamp and set it in front of her; at once the night leant against the veranda rail. She tried to continue reading, but it was difficult and the insects that fluttered and crawled about the lamp distracted her. She wanted to retain her mood of peace, but the drag of time brought with it the restlessness of boredom. She could hear Gopal laying the table, but dinner would not be ready for at least an hour.

(IX)

It was the time of year when the new broods of lac insects were swarming and the resin-encrusted twigs and

small branches should be cut before being parasited or possibly even melting to waste in the heat. This required good judgment, for enough brood lac must be left to provide the new infestations with a maximum amount of soft new growth on which to feed. Sarah knew the theory of this, now she wanted to watch the practice.

Each morning at eight o'clock she joined Johan and the coolies at the end of the drive, and each day she tried to talk to Johan as they walked the rough dusty footpath. She spoke carefully, choosing simple words to ask simple questions, helping his limping English. But by the end of half an hour long silences would have fallen. Never once did Johan initiate a topic of conversation.

It was a long walk, and when they reached the first of the plantation areas she would sit in the shade of a kusum tree and rest, watching the coolies sort out their implements with a ritualistic air. She would listen, uncomprehendingly, to Johan's instructions as to which trees were to be climbed and how much stick lac was to be cut from each. Then she would follow the coolies from tree to tree.

To begin with, the time passed quickly. She found a fascination in things which to Johan and the coolies were commonplace: the multitudinous insects, the metallic quiver of butterflies, the inch-wide column of marching ants, jet black, glistening, sometimes exuding a sensation of green phosphorus. And in the wild mangoes at this season the coolies would find the nests of red ants, spheres of living leaves larger than a football, webbed together internally with a sticky white gossamer. Sometimes they would cut down such a nest, and as it hit the ground the ants (long as the nail of her little finger and red as rich barley sugar) would pour out like fire, seeking danger. The coolies laughed as they rolled the nest away from the

swarming ground and then, oblivious or inured to the savage bites, would tear open the nests in search of the soft milky eggs. They would pick out the biggest and offer them to her on a clean leaf, but she could not bring herself to eat them although they were delicately pleasant. She was afraid of these ants; they seemed to possess a malignant intelligence. Very gingerly she would persuade one on to the end of a long twig and then examine it, fascinated by the dark filament eyes, by the way it turned its head to watch her all the time. They never attempted to escape, would open their mandibles at the cautious approach of her finger. Once she was bitten and the pain was sharp and fiery. After that she could scarcely bear to watch their red bodies clinging to the coolies hands as they tore the nest apart.

And there were birds of great loveliness. In more distant trees she would hear them call. In the rocks and stones from which the trees burst there were many kinds of lizards, and scarab beetles with backs of soft red velvet. The rocks themselves were multi-coloured, obsidian black, rose quartz, grey, mica-flecked; they were scorching to the touch. And everywhere was movement, the rocks, the rise and fall of ground, all wavered in the quivering uprush of heat. Tall sirus trees fountained green leaves towards the pale sky, kusum and wild mango, neem and pcepul rolled blue-green, green-black waves in the steady rush of burning air.

But each day the heat sucked at her strength, and by each afternoon she would follow without interest from tree to tree, while the coolies climbed and cut, ceaselessly commenting to one another about their work or the quality of the lac. And in the evening time, when the very wind exhausted itself and the sun was dying in a molten and distorted ball, she would trudge back, too tired to

talk; burnt out. Even the sweat from beneath her hat could no longer trickle down her face to drip on her shirt. It stayed in beads on her forehead, showed in grimy lines on her nose and the side of her face. Her whole body would be slack and heavy, would obsess her with its demands for rest, for water, for coolness. And as she walked, trying to pretend that she was not exhausted, seeing only the ground jerk past her feet, she experienced something akin to a defeat, that the land was unfairly rejecting her, because she did not belong and because she was a woman. And yet not a rejection, only a vast indifference. For in this landscape (so her thirst and her aching body told her) she existed only on sufferance, only because the accident of wealth had brought into being servants and the bungalow, that alien refuge. A part of her tried to evade this knowledge, did evade it once she had bathed and changed, could smell scent, feel the richness of clothes, call to Gopal to bring tea.

It was a relief when Sunday came, and in the afternoon she visited Depuyt.

When Depuyt saw the car he muttered under his breath. Sunday started at three-thirty in the morning and was the busiest day of the week. It was regarded as a holiday by sansar and Christian alike, and the mission was also regarded by both as the place to go with trouble. The more distant villagers were forced to save up these troubles until Sunday, and then, putting on their bravest clothes, walk maybe twenty miles to Anpura. All Catholics within a ten-mile radius attended one of the two Masses regularly, and as most of them received Communion Depuyt usually spent an hour in the confessional before each Mass. It was necessary to begin the first Mass not later than five o'clock. The old men, the pregnant

women and those who had to carry babes in arms found a round trip of some twenty miles along hilly tracks too tiring when the shade temperature reached above a hundred.

And all day long groups or individuals would wait their turn to speak with him, either as friends, petitioners or patients. Only the hour of his midday meal was undisturbed, for eating was of primary importance and to expect a man to interrupt his meal was unthinkable. It was permissible to watch children eat, but not an adult.

He intended to tell Sarah that today was inconvenient, but when he saw her he was struck by her tired expression. He remembered too that she had been alone in Bandhu for a week.

"You are looking tired," he said as soon as she sat down at the table. "Would you like tea or lime juice?"

"Lime juice, thank you. I do feel rather tired, I've been out at the plantations all the week."

"I warned you against this heat. You ought to rest in the middle of the day, properly, like the Mundas themselves."

"I try, but I can't just lie down and sleep like the coolies. Even if there were no flies and ants and insects the ground's too hard. I'm perfectly all right really." She was about to enquire as to his own activities when a young man was led up the veranda steps by his mother. His eyes were swollen shut, his mouth drawn with resigned pain. As he came nearer Sarah looked away, for the white mucus discharge which gummed his lids together revolted her, hardened as she was.

And when Depuyt came back from the dispensary there was an old man to mumble unintelligibly to him, and for a long time. His place was taken by a woman whose legs were covered with sores. "You must excuse me," Depuyt

said, "but Sunday is always like this. Why don't you go round the garden? This will be over in another hour as they're afraid of the dark and most of them have a long way to go."

She would have preferred to sit on the veranda or to have gone home. But she did not want to interfere with his work nor give him the impression that he had driven her away. And so, feeling awkward and excluded, she walked through the gloomy and austere bungalow and loitered round the garden.

But now the familiar was too familiar, and what was unknown remained unknown without Depuyt to explain and to bring to life. She was tired; the suffocating heat was a blanket in which she sweated and the dark patches showing on her linen dress irritated her. She was bored and dispirited, finishing her tour too quickly. Then she saw the chapel and with no clear intention made her way slowly towards it. The door was shut and she pressed the latch almost surreptitiously, afraid that it would be locked and someone would run to Depuyt for the key. Her pressing of the latch was like the touching of paint marked 'Wet'. The latch clicked and she stepped inside. ·

Her first impression was of an empty white store-room. There were no pews or pulpit, only a *prie-dieu* against the far end of the right-hand wall. On it was a criss-cross wooden grille and beyond it a cane chair. She did not realise that it was the confessional. A red sanctuary lamp burned; there were white flowers between the candles on the altar.

Momentarily she was attracted, then she was aware of the cloying heaviness of stale incense, of the sickly simper on the face of the Madonna. There were pictures round the walls and she moved closer, suddenly realising that they were the stations of the Cross. It was very hot,

bluebottles rose from the floor and beneath the smell of incense was another, sharply sour. She gazed in fascinated horror at the cheap oleographs, at some late nineteenth-century painter's conception of Christ, at the vacuously weak face. It reminded her of an albino spaniel dying of distemper. Liking Depuyt she had no wish to be critical, but she was repelled and contemptuous. She turned back to the door and paused, trying (without knowing why) to recapture her first moment of pleasure. It was just a stuffy chapel. 'It's bogus,' she thought, and then stepped out into the force of the afternoon. She was afraid Depuyt might ask her if she had visited the chapel and whether she liked it, for she was curiously reluctant to lie.

But he was still engaged, although the sunlight was slanting thickly. She wanted to be alone with him, thinking that his talk would take away this taste of sickness. But it would be better to go, better not to admit that she was weak enough to allow a picture to affect her judgment of Depuyt. It was not *his* picture anyway, and she knew that the whole incident was so petty that she could have stamped at her own stupidity.

She would have stayed, but it was Depuyt who now said that he would be busy for some time yet. It was true; it was also true that he knew his people and did not wish them to see this woman sitting on and on until darkness.

"Forgive me for appearing rude, but today is perhaps a little difficult. You are not tired of Bandhu, you will come again next week?"

"Yes, I'd like to." She smiled, and he wondered why he thought her smile no longer sincere. Perhaps she was annoyed, but that would be too silly. "Don't try and do too much. You must be tired of the plantations by now; why don't you take the car one afternoon and see more of Bihar? There's nothing around here of any great interest,

but there's a good drive out to a place called Paligarh. It's about sixty miles away, in the plains at the foot of the plateau. It only has a small and very ugly palace built about 1850, but the drive is worth doing. And the palace has a somewhat curious air, a complete *mésalliance* between East and West." He nearly suggested going with her, for he would have enjoyed the drive.

(X)

The next morning Sarah awoke with a slight headache and an accustomed whisper of pain. She wondered whether it would be better not to walk out to the plantations, but the thought of spending all day in the stifling bungalow or the even hotter factory depressed her. At least if she went to the plantations she would be able to wander off by herself, for this condition often made her irritable and irrationally self-conscious. She decided to let the coolies go on ahead and then to take her time, and when Gopal brought her tea she sent a message telling Johan.

As she lay in bed she thought of yesterday and of Depuyt. She was annoyed that her critical mood still lingered, but her annoyance was for her childishness. And yet, she told herself, I have stopped being childish. I put Depuyt on too high a pedestal, looked on him as a self-sacrificing hero devoting his life to something admittedly good in theory, but what does the practice amount to? A bit of free medical treatment. His life didn't even possess the merit of a hair shirt (if that had any merit) because he was happy. He was really as self-indulgent as herself, in a different way. In fact more indulgent, because over all these last months she had lived an unnaturally pure life.

She drew deeply on her cigarette and watched the

smoke roll against the mosquito net; it was strange how such a filmy barrier prevented its escape. She did not regret these last months at all: they had provided proof that she could control herself. It was not difficult. And so much of the sex since Robert seemed an inexplicable waste of time, except perhaps Conrado, and that first American . . . better not think of those things for they were traced through with a regret. And at once, striking instantaneously through the years, she recalled the night of her father's funeral and the corporal, the floor of the sitting-room, the strange harshness of the carpet against her naked back, the curious clinging suppleness of their intertwined limbs.

She got out of bed quickly, and, as the surest way to prohibit further thought, went to the dressing-table and began to examine her face in the mirror.

She did not walk as leisurely as she had intended, hurrying to escape the shadeless track and the sun burning on her sweat like an acid. She spoke briefly to Johan and then wandered away and sat on a flat rock beneath a banyan tree. She took off her hat and let the hot wind cool the nape of her neck and the roots of her hair. She was restless, physically uncomfortable. After what seemed a long time she rejoined the coolies, twisting her wrist-watch so that she should not inadvertently see the slow passage of time.

But everything spoke of a long time passing. The sun crawled with the slowness of lava toward its zenith; not a sun but a tawny drop of brass imperceptibly shrinking as it rose through the lower levels of the distorting sky. The horizon itself was shrinking with the heat, and as its walls of dust crept closer, so they radiated a more suffocating heat. For a little longer she found relief by moving

carefully from shade to shade, but the wind pouring across the land evaporated her pool of strength and robbed shade of comfort. The glittering and dancing rocks, the sun-pierced canopies of rushing green, twisted and span like a bright object suspended from the fingers of a hypnotist. By the early afternoon, having nibbled distastefully at hard-boiled eggs and a piece of tough and greasy chicken, sitting propped against some rock or tree, too uncomfortable for sleep, the spinning brightness drew out all her mind. There was left to take its place only a vast and burning loneliness, harsher than the rocks against her back. There was no humanity, for between her and these strange-tongued, magic-haunted Mundas, sexless in their naked blackness, inhumanly sleeping on the stony ground beneath another tree, was a gulf across which she could only shout through the mouth of Johan. And out here, her attention compulsively held by the twisting silver of melting rocks and immovable wind, the faint evidence of Johan's humanity was also destroyed. In the evening beauty would flow back in a tiered wash of coloured distance. But now there was no beauty, only this burning void, and, totally enveloped, the envelope of her flesh. Her own flesh helped fill this burning void with its own mortification, formed part of the twisting brightness from which she could not move her closed and dust-sore eyes. Sweat trickled, flies settled, ants crawled. The wind burned grittily, iron lumps bored up through her buttocks and pressed against the bone of her back. She would stand up stiffly, wearily, to lean against a tree, but each trunk was a highway for the red fury of ants, for repellent and biting beetles. It was a relief when the afternoon work began again, when the middle afternoon, even at the moment of most intensity, promised that the wind would die and the sun set.

By the time Sarah arrived back at the bungalow she was in a state of craving for rest and the feel of water. She tended her body with a careful gentleness, as though it had been brutally outraged by the day. And the physical relief was of such pleasure that for a short time it spread to the day that was past and the day still to come.

And the next day cindered itself away in the same fashion, and the cindered days that followed. Gopal had begun to pick the scarlet and gold flowers which now swamped the flamboyant by Patras's bungalow. She would awake to see them burn on her dressing-table, make a brazier of fire in the dining-room fanned from above by the creaking punkah. Then she would step into a bell-glass of hours; return to the brazier of fire and the fiercely burning flowers in her bedroom. A morning came when Gopal did not call her at the usual hour, and she remembered with surprise that it was Sunday. The cindered week suddenly crumbled between her fingers into a grit of exasperation. She decided to visit Depuyt and then changed her mind. She was too restless, he would be too busy, in any case she did not want to see him. She did not know what she wanted, only knowing this restlessness. With nothing to do, nothing to pit herself against, the day already seemed endless.

Then she remembered Paligarh.

(XI)

The car reached the end of the track and the driver began to turn towards Anpura.

"No!" she called out sharply, "I told you . . . Paligarh, to the left." The driver jabbed at the brake and she slid forward. "Don't you know where it is?"

"Yes, memsahib." But his voice was doubtful and the car was turned hesitantly. She was aware that her stomach felt as though she was about to miss a train for an important journey. And at the same moment she thought of Depuyt, saw in her mind's eye a black group loitering near his veranda, black umbrellas open against the sun. He would be sitting at the table, there would be more men and women on the veranda. Then, when the last figure had bowed over folded hands or knelt in front of him, he would be alone. Even before then; always he would be alone with the wind and the heat, a lizard aslant across a wall, the flies on his mosquito net. Sunday after Sunday for ever and ever, the infrequent changes of routine only underlining the empty and appalling monotony of his useless life. . . .

Impatiently she sat upright and allowed her mind to fill with the rush of movement and the curving rise and fall of the tree-lined road. The scorched paddy-fields that ran like pale brown rivers between the hills drew her eyes to the distant vistas of the saucer-shaped plateau. There was no cloud in the blue haze, only a pinpoint sun pouring down a light so intense that it was not sunlight but a new element throwing a burning shadow. It seemed impossible that there should come a period of long rains, that the rock-like ground could soften and be hidden by the water green of rice; inconceivable too that in this merciless season most of the wayside trees were soft with new leaves, red-green and limp.

To her it was miracle enough that any tree should exist at all, even in the shallow valleys, but all this new landscape was veined with trees, veins that spread into pools of green or petered out to leave some hilltop with a solitary tree bursting from the lizard-haunted rocks. There seemed no rhyme nor reason where the trees took root. A

cattle-wallow whose surface was stiff as half-cooled chocolate was without shade or green of any kind; a short distance away, on rising ground, the roots of a banyan tree caged in a rock as big as a cottage. It was a paradox, as exasperating as to awake from a dream of feasting. They passed a village built on an apron of black rock, the dull red tiles shaking in the heat. They twisted down a steep valley pale with bamboo, across a bridge over a bed of stone still set with shallow pools of cloudy jade. A snake's head rippled in the pool and was gone beneath a ledge of rock, white fluff from a cottonwood floated crazily in and out of the car window and a brainfever bird warned hysterically against the midday sun. They stopped in a small town at a ramshackle shed and at once heat clung to her, the car filled with flies and the smell of oil. She pushed her way out, waiting for the last can of petrol to gurgle through the battered funnel. She could hear the faint sound of Indian music, dissonant, quavering and thin.

Soon after they started again Sarah became aware of the coarse talcum of dust on her skin; the leather seat was greyly powdered. She was thirsty and her eyes were sore, the rushing air as hot as a hair-drier. She leant back against the seat and its heat stung through her dress; already the lap of her skirt was marked with dusty sweat where her hands lay. And now discomfort and the beginning of fatigue faintly touched what she saw, brought an awareness of the hostility and strength of the land, and she was brushed too by the thought that this only stemmed from her own weakness and ignorance. And with that came a fierce resentment which she did not understand. She began to watch the road ahead. The heat, the swaying car, touched her with heavy fingers, and unconsciously her eyes turned again to the country that pressed intolerantly against the narrow road. The sound

of the car and the swish of trees faded away and the alien landscape blurred as it turned against the clock—rock, trees and the immovable rim of mauve distant hills, all pivoting on her. She fled the countryside; she was dwindling away, no longer Sarah Middleton, in a moment she would be snatched into the outer air, changed into a village woman, a living rock, a glitter of dust. She was nothing, yet held in being by the tin-tack of herself. Her hands clenched each other and she slept uneasily, momentarily, waking as the car swerved to avoid a goat glaring from the edge of the road.

She sat up and lit an unwanted cigarette with difficulty. She tried to think about herself, what she would do on her return to London, but her past life seemed unimaginably remote and pale, all memory drowned beneath the waves of heat and light. The car turned a corner and without warning the plains stretched endlessly away two thousand feet below, dun-coloured and featureless save for a wandering thread of silver and the straight green line of road ending in the dark patch of Paligarh. The heat swept up from the plains, hurting the back of her nostrils. In spite of the added heat she felt herself relax as she gazed over the spectacular emptiness, the flatness that promised ease as opposed to the black strain of the eroded plateau. Here people would sleep beneath the trees from laziness, not exhaustion, and they would sweat oil, not salt.

But as she sat in the only tea stall open in Paligarh at that hour she wished that she had stopped outside the town. Better to have imagined it cool with gardens, asleep while the afternoon drifted away to the sound of hidden bells. The flat tin roof seemed to focus the heat of the sun on to the nape of her neck, flies from the open drain between the stall and the road settled incessantly on her face and arms, on the rim of the cup of sickly tea. Un-

suspectingly she had eaten two small cakes and her mouth burned with hidden chili seeds.

She finished her tea and shifted uncomfortably on the wooden bench. Two pariah dogs wandered mangily by the side of the drain towards her, and grey-necked crows, watching the dogs, planed gracefully over their heads to forestall their search. An eddy of wind stirred the ashes in the baked mud fireplace and a sliver of wood began to smoulder. The hollow-chested proprietor, bare to the waist, whispered asthmatical questions to the driver, his eyes fixed on Sarah. The constant effort to breathe air that seemed as heavy as treacle had drawn exhausted lines down his face. His eyes were bloodshot and rheumy from the smoke of fires.

"Wait for me." She spoke to the driver, but the blanket of heat was too heavy and she could not turn her head. As she stood up sweat ran down her throat and trickled between her breasts, dripped from her finger-tips. The proprietor asked a question huskily, and she shook her head. She stepped across the gassy drain, walking down the road between the chaos of mean shops, shuttered and barred. There were sleeping figures in the narrow shadows, but she did not see them. A coolie lying between the shafts of a rickshaw woke and shook the dead bells at his wrist. She reached a side street and in the distance saw red crenellated walls above a flamboyant tree. The full-blown flowers fell about her as she passed.

A man with a shaven head and painted face sat cross-legged in the sun, hands folded across his lap. He was close to tall gates of foot-thick wood. His body was grey with ash, naked and hairless. Not a bead of moisture showed. She knew that he would not look at her, but he did look up, and then she was squeezing through the slanting gap in the wooden gates.

The red sandstone building was altogether disproportionately large to the square of the outer walls. The narrow strip of separating courtyard was overgrown with tall dry weeds, lantana had burst through the stone slabs and the air was bitter with its rankness. The delicate marble columns of a small bandstand just supported the weight of a knotted creeper, and through a doorless doorway beneath a high veranda she could see the gloom of a room and beyond it an inner courtyard. As she was about to pass through she looked back and the Sadhu stood, naked, in the shadow of the archway. She was shocked as she saw his large and hairless genitals, but not with anger nor disgust. She turned abruptly and crossed the empty room to the inner courtyard. The smell of bats clung to her fair hair and the patches of sweat spreading from her armpits. The two storeys above her were balconied, broad wooden stairs led to each; she mounted the first flight and looked over the dry-rotted balustrade, but the courtyard was empty and silent.

She entered what had once been the throne-room; it was disappointingly small, a doll's-house room for a minor rajah. The shutters of the six long windows had been unscrewed and stacked in a corner. Each pane of glass was intact and she wondered vaguely why they buzzed with flies: the marble floor below each window was black with their dried bodies. A tawdry chandelier lay smashed on the floor, and a girl in a long skirt, her brown hair massed, offered an English rose from a calendar that bore no date. The long narrow room held only a dais, the dead and living flies, the calendar, the chandelier. The house creaked in the heat, empty and forgotten.

She opened more doors but there was nothing to see except the trivial débris of time. Again she peered into the courtyard, wondering uneasily where the Sadhu was.

Perhaps in the dark room she had crossed . . . and she ran down the stairs and burst through the rancid smell. Almost she expected to see him in the bandstand, naked and grey, clothed from head to foot by his lustreless eyes. She was suddenly afraid of the loneliness, the sighing wind, the unseen and repulsive man. She imagined snakes, coiled malignantly beneath the tangled weeds. She would go back at once to the safety of the car. And then against her will she had turned the first corner and was picking her way through the scratchy weeds and lantana towards the rear of the building, while the air seemed to increase in weight. It reached a climax against her ears and broke into the sound of a heavy droning. Unconsciously she quickened her pace, scratching her bare legs, and when she reached the farthest wall she turned and faced the building.

She saw the Sadhu. He was sitting motionless between two pillars that supported the high veranda beneath the throne-room. He was changed, hideously distorted; in this first glance she saw the huge combs of wild bees hanging from the beams across the veranda roof, and black lumps lay around him. The air was full of the sound of bees and their coming and going was like a thin black smoke against the red walls.

She began to approach, horrified, and now she could see that his body was coated with the glistening shimmer of bees, his genitals and stomach thickly covered. His chest and arms and head crawled with the insects, but the flesh showed through and streamed with sweat. She came still nearer, directly facing him, watching the bees crawl across his open eyes as he stared unblinkingly into hers. A bee was half hidden in a fleshy nostril while others pushed at the thick mouth and she imagined them, wet with slime, dragging their wings and legs down his throat.

A breath of wind carried the scent of her body to the veranda and the heavy drone took on a sharper note. She knew that she must run and yet she could not; in front of her the Sadhu rose effortlessly to his feet and a crawling cluster fell from his stomach to the stone floor. There was a bulging mass from which a lump suddenly broke away. She stood motionless, mirroring his own motionless body, watching his ejaculation spurt from his loins. A stab of fire shot through the calf of her leg and she was running hysterically through the dry thorns, her hands beating wildly at the bee-less air above her head.

(XII)

By the time she returned to Bandhu her head was aching intolerably. For the last few miles she had been aware of a peculiarly lurid light which flooded everything, and when she stepped out of the car she saw that the sun was buried behind a low bank of clouds. Seen through this umber light the hills to the south, and the cone-shaped hill in particular, were indigo, violent and clear. By the side of the drive a few leaves moved as the car drove away and then were still. The dining-room was already heavy with night and in her bedroom the sullen light from the open shutters intensified the dead and stifling heat. She took some aspirin and called Gopal to bring tea on the veranda.

Time passed and the poisonous light was sucked back into the clouds. Gopal brought a lamp, but the unwavering flame pulsed against her eyes: she moved her chair and sat staring into the darkness. Her headache grew steadily worse and the tea she had drunk made the sweat roll down her arms and face as though she was sweating out a fever. A part of her mind was afraid of some oncoming illness, and yet she knew that that was not

the truth; it was what she had seen at Paligarh which obsessed her, the moment when he had risen to his feet. Though she repeated and repeated to the surface of her mind to forget that moment, an event in which she was not concerned and had been unfairly snared, the surface of her mind was never penetrated. And all the time her own flesh crawled and shuddered beneath a sick and rapt lustfulness.

She tried to eat dinner but the food revolted her. As soon as the meal was over she went to the bedroom and rummaged in a suitcase until she found her sleeping tablets. She took a larger amount than usual and hurriedly undressed. A drum was tapping from the village, piercing down through the waves of heat and fatigue and drug.

She awoke too late to hear the thunder which had dragged her back. She was dimly aware that the room was cool and the mosquito net was moving. Outside was a thin curtain of sound which she could not identify. She was uneasy; something had taken place which she would remember, something was about to take place which she feared. The curtain of sound was thickening. The open window leapt towards the bed and the room blazed with a jerking blue light; at the same moment a vast explosion crushed the bungalow as the sky broke slowly across. She lay rigid on the bed, her eyes blinded, wide open. As the sound rolled away the curtain of water smashed across the compound.

She lifted her head a little from the pillow. She no longer feared the monstrous peals and the almost continuous blaze of light. It was the wind of which she was afraid, the wind which roared through the orchard and poured into the room with the paralysing violence of huge breakers, cracking to the shutters, sucking them open again, driving the icy rain in a drenching spray through the mosquito net. And when the room shook with the

unearthly light it was the wind creating it, making the angled shadows leap and the mirror run with a malignant magic, creating a terrifying fluidity as though all natural laws were in abeyance. Suddenly, still half drugged and wholly terrified, she was convinced that in the garden crouched a man, crept a man, was already on the veranda, turning the handle of her door, watching the slamming shutters, water and lightning pouring off him.

With shaking fingers she dragged out the soaking mosquito net from under the mattress, stumbled across the room towards the window. The shutters were almost closed; as she reached out to secure them they flew back from her hand and lightning fell from the racing clouds. Rain lashed against her face and body, the line of tossing mango trees, streaming spray, rushed towards her. And, as the light jerked blue and grey, as the shadows dissolved and twisted and thunder stunned, she saw Johan standing against a tree, his eyes blind with light, arms limp, his body pushing towards her, jewelled with black rivulets of fire.

A vein of fire reached to the ground not a hundred yards away and by its light the image was etched for ever on her mind. But she did not move nor was she any longer afraid. In the impenetrable and roaring blackness that followed she knew the garden was empty, save only for herself.

When Gopal brought tea the next morning Sarah told him, without opening her eyes, to take it away and not to disturb her until she called. Then, still drowsy with sleeping tablets and soothed by the unusual coolness of the rain-soaked land, she slept on for a long time.

Gradually wedges of light through the closed shutters increased in brightness and prised open her eyes. She was surprised to find her headache gone and her body felt

fresh and strong. Very tentatively she began to finger her confused memories. First she recalled, in minutest detail, the Sadhu. She could do so without eroticism, for that same eroticism now rushed back as she remembered the storm and Johan. She closed her eyes to remember the more vividly, lying flat on her back, pressing her head down against the pillow. She knew that what she had seen was only her imagination. It was inexplicable yet at the same time it needed no explanation; it had happened and now she was glad that it had happened. Here at last was a situation which seemed to her absolutely concrete and with which she knew exactly how to deal. All her other problems, the vague but persistent unhappiness, the sense of futility and emptiness coupled with the intimation (whispered in an unknown tongue) that a happiness past understanding could exist, all these were swept away as pale and shadowy and of no importance. Here was an aspect of lust she had never before encountered; was the more desirable because of that, because it was totally unexpected, because it was impossible of achievement. But in the meantime it stood four-square and solid in her mind, and she immediately began to nourish it . . . once more she stood in the window, the huge drops of rain lashing her nightgown into transparency, saw the black body and mask-like face glittering with water. She held out her hands and in the (now) warm and roaring darkness felt her wrists seized, leaned back with all her strength and Johan was in the room and the shutters closed. He knelt on the wet floor at her feet, pulling up the soaked nightgown, burying his face, pushing his face up between her thighs. Her own hands pulled at the side of his head, pulling him to his feet so that she could feel, cradling, stroking, pressing. Then, on the bed, pinned under him, pinned under him, twisting upwards. Again, their

blackness and whiteness inextricably interlocked, the smell and feel of his sweat; their mouths.

She opened her eyes slowly and smiled. So this is where your purity campaign has ended up, she thought. Not drinking, taking tea and talking to the missionaries. You revolting, stupid, bloody little hypocrite. One glimpse of a bit of black and you're barking.

But somehow she could not feel shame although she knew that she should. After all, she told herself with another inward smile, one can't help having thoughts. I've done nothing yet, nor intend to.

And yet she knew that if she could have intercourse, with no possibility of detection, she would. And if she could be certain too that he would not tell another living soul. She shook her head. Unless it's to their own advantage not to brag they almost always tell someone, and to expect *him* not to talk was madness. So she would do nothing. This was only a mood, it would pass.

For a few days the effect of the storm lingered on, reflected in the renewed landscape. The rain had washed the dust out of the sky and for a brief space of time would prevent the wind licking the powdery soil from the eroded land and unsown paddy-fields. In this clear air the horizon expanded and contracted, the first line of hills to the south came closer, yet through gaps and saddles paler and more distant ridges showed for the first time.

And all the countryside seemed sharper, more brilliant and alive. Instead of a universal dusty green the trees now proclaimed their difference by colour and texture as well as shape. The faintest wash of faded green had crept back into the sparse and withered grass. Hitherto unseen and even more exotic butterflies suddenly appeared. In the

evening time swarming termites smoked upwards from the garden and the fields, hawked by black drongos and egrets. And when the lamps were lit these soft white insects swarmed to the veranda and into the rooms, shedding their wings and trying to crawl into the protected flames. She was plagued by the flight of large droning beetles, was afraid that they would tangle their spiked and armoured legs in her hair. And, as she lay in bed, the noise of cicadas helped to delay her sleep.

During this time Sarah too felt renewed and, in a strange way, washed clean. She was back again in a familiar world with herself once more filling all the centre. The strangeness had gone and with it that melancholy which in retrospect seemed to have informed all her days. She actively missed Michael's company now, but at the same time did not want him to return, knowing that his presence would interfere with her almost incessant train of thought. And for this brief time her personal horizon mirrored the natural one. She felt that she was limitlessly free and yet more constricted than ever before. But the constriction was not at this moment a stifling one. Like the nearer hills it was sharply pleasurable, voluptuously beautiful and close at hand, yet safely out of reach. She did not intend to turn her fantasies into reality, content to possess Johan in her mind as an abstract instrument of lust.

But perhaps a little increased familiarity would not hurt. He was, after all, Patras's son and her future manager. And it was almost a duty to try and remove the sourness of Michael's behaviour.

Over the land and Sarah the sun poured down a fiercer fire, unencumbered by the pall of dust. It was a heat which not even the coolies could tolerate, and Patras asked Sarah if she would agree to a change in the hours of

plantation work which would allow them to sleep in the shade from twelve until three. At first she hesitated, not wishing to get up at six. Then she agreed, but told him that Johan should wait behind each morning until the usual time so that he could carry her food and water.

On the first morning of this new régime she began to ask him questions about his childhood, his mother, at what age he had gone to school. But even with such uncomplicated subjects she was aware that for him the conversation was a strain, an anxious and laborious translation of her words first into Mundari, then his own answers back again into English. She spoke slowly and chose words which to her could not have been more simple, but even so she was sure that he only partly understood. When she asked him if he remembered his mother he haltingly answered that she was dead.

"But you do remember her, don't you?"

"Yes, memsahib." Probably that was the answer she wished to hear.

"How old were you when she died?"

"Not knowing, memsahib."

"But you must know to within a little!"

"No, memsahib. Dying when born."

"Then you don't remember her?" she said, unable to keep the exasperation out of her voice.

"Yes, memsahib."

"Come and walk next to me, Johan, I can't talk over my shoulder." And reluctantly he would draw level for a little while, ill at ease because Mundas prefer to walk in file. Walking next to a woman was in any case shamefully undignified, a too public display of affection even between husband and wife. But every now and then the track would narrow, and once behind her he would make no attempt to draw level again.

She did not insist after the second time. She had been walking for half an hour and was sweating profusely, the low sun hot on her face. And the effort of talking, of injecting interest into trivial questions and listening to his woolly answers had tired her. She stopped.

"You go in front, Johan."

Now she could watch the black ripple of his legs, the broad shoulders, the muscled neck, the casque of black wavy hair. She wished that he would dress like the rest of the coolies instead of wearing shorts and the threadbare shirt. She let her imagination linger indecently and for a long time upon his body.

Then the tide of interest began to ebb. It was too squalid, too futile.

But in the centre of the day, after she had eaten lunch and was sitting alone in the shade, with the heat swimming in her head and the hot wind stroking her body beneath her clothes, she deliberately began to fantasy herself again until her face grew slackly heavy and her eyelids drooped. The lethargy of desire would drift her thoughts away from Johan's body. But each time some calculating nerve jerked her back; she would begin once more his impossible possession.

After five days the blue sky had changed back into an opaque dome of heat and the sun had shrunk to a molten ball. The more distant ridges had vanished; the green of trees was drabbed with dust. And the constant roughness of this dust on her skin, in her hair and clothes, on all the furniture, seemed far more irritating than before, rasping her with a harshness, a coarseness not far from cruelty. The cockroaches in the bungalow which she had viewed first with disgust, then indifference, now angered her. If she was quick enough she would stamp

on them, tightening her lips at their crunching softness.

The only relief from her thoughts of Johan were outbursts of irritation against Gopal. Now she was quite unafraid that he might leave, for if he went Johan could take his place on the excuse that he could interpret. But unfortunately Gopal, sensing almost at once that she no longer cared whether he stayed or not (and relieved of Michael's presence), decided that he had behaved stupidly. His sudden improvement was as irritating to Sarah as his deterioration, and she began to put her foot down on him no less quickly than on the cockroaches. She knew that her behaviour was worse than Michael's, for at least he had been suffering physically. She tried to stop but she could not: once started she discovered that the unjust imposition of her will on another human being was too sharply enjoyable.

She also discovered (though it meant little to her) that she was far more ashamed of this treatment of Gopal than of her thoughts concerning Johan. She would not particularly mind if Michael told mutual acquaintances in London that she had slept with a coolie in Bandhu, but would be furiously angry if he whispered that she had mercilessly nagged her bearer.

(XIII)

A week later Sarah told Patras that soon, perhaps in one more week, she would return to London. It was now the beginning of the second week in May and the present work on the plantations was coming to an end until after the monsoon. During these past days she had thought about Johan to an extent and an intensity that had brought a satiation and even a self-disgust strong enough to include him, as though he had in reality been her accomplice.

The attempted cloying camaraderie slowly died, leaving only the attitude of mistress and servant stiffened by an obscure wish for some revenge. But this she kept in check, for she was sometimes still capable of visualising him as an object of desire. She was also guilty, afraid of how much he might have noticed. It was better to stay on friendly terms.

Her decision to leave did not spring directly from the slow cessation of what she sometimes looked on as a ludicrous and other times a frightening obsession. But as the week had passed with this violence diminishing, so she had felt a return of her earlier delight in the vast and dancing fusion of sun and wind, trees and the eroded plateau. And, like a child or an old man who keeps some titbit on their plate to eat last, she thought it best to go while this mood was dominant. It was a relief not to have soiled all this, not to have turned Bandhu into a corner of the world where she could never return and feel at ease.

And she also wanted to visit Depuyt again, but it was now three weeks since she had last seen him. She was reluctant to face what she imagined might be his silent curiosity at the sudden and discourteous end of visits. She also felt that it was unfair to treat him as a convenience to be fitted in with the vagaries of her moods. But she made up her mind that before she left she would call again and invite him to dinner at Bandhu.

One more week went by and Sarah was ready to go. During the last two days the shade temperature had reached 106°, the usual scourge of dust-filled wind had only blown fitfully and the heat had seemed less bearable in consequence. On the Saturday afternoon she drove into Anpura and sent a telegram to her agents in Calcutta, telling them that she would arrive on the following Thursday. She knew that it would take a full day to reach Calcutta from Bandhu: she would ask Depuyt to dine

on Tuesday and she would leave the following morning.

But when the car pulled up at his bungalow she could tell at once that it was empty. The table on the veranda was gone, the doors were shut and no Mundas loitered. She sent the driver to the cookhouse, but that too was padlocked. She opened her bag, knowing in advance that she had no pencil. She was relieved; tomorrow she could send a message saying she had called, and ask him to dinner. If he was still away someone in the bazaar would know the date of his return.

On Sunday morning Sarah awoke early. The monotonous tonk tonk of a coppersmith bird underlined the silence of moving leaves mingling with the warm hum of insects. She lay still, feeling as though she had already left Bandhu and was being held in the actionless activity of a long journey. She began to consider today, how best to preserve her present peace from the slow erosion of boredom.

As of habit she put on her dressing-gown and went to the veranda. In the blue and hazy distance rose the cone-shaped hill, tantalisingly close, desirably distant, its summit falsely promising coolness. But its true promise, that from the top she would see all the panorama of this land and beyond the ridges the distant and unimaginable south, decided her to go. It would be a good farewell.

She guessed that the summit was some two hours away. On her return she would be very tired; better to start in the early afternoon and come back when the sun was beginning to set. Then she could go to bed early, would avoid sleeping in the afternoon and spending a lamp-lit evening on the veranda pestered with insects, the hot restlessness of trying to find the sleep she had already squandered.

She ate an early lunch, drank as much water as she could force down, hesitated on the last step of the veranda. Tentatively she took the full weight of the sun on her shoulders and felt instantaneous heat spread through the crown of her hat. Today the wind blew fitfully and the sky shaded from dull brown on the horizon to a white ache around the sun. She walked more quickly than usual, glancing back to watch the bungalow and factory dwindle away, sway in the waves of heat as though about to dissolve. A lull in the wind allowed a twisting column of air to sprout in an empty field in front of her. It grew until the centre was thick with dust and fragments of grass, then advanced slowly to meet her, bending towards her, almost snatching away her hat as its scorching fingers twisted her skirt, filled her face with gritty dust.

She passed the plantation area and branched off to the right. Two miles away, on the other side of the shallow valley that was dotted with scrub and a few massive mahua trees, a shoulder of land half hid the hill. She had already walked for an hour in the blistering heat, but an excited eagerness masked the beginning of fatigue, made her unaware of sweat-soaked clothes and the tiny hammer-strokes of reflected light behind her eyes. It was a strange eagerness, not centred on the summit of the hill; a diffused ache filled her, a hunger to go on and on past the hill, over the ridge, through the jungle—on and on until there was nothing more to be seen, only a limitless ocean receding goldenly from an empty beach. And though she was drawn out like a thread of fire towards this heart of distance she was aware too of immediate beauty, of a multiplicity of shape and colour and life forming a single whole into which her existence flowed and flowed back. Her face was stiff, drawn with an ecstasy that she should live.

But at the end of another hour, as she skirted the hill to approach it from the south, her body could not support this inner force. It had dripped away, from her fingertips, from her chin, had been evaporated by the fitful wind, pushed out of her legs by the stony track. Now it seemed dim compared to the glitter of mica-flecked rocks and dust which slowly passed.

Suddenly she came to a steep-banked, narrow stream. In the scorching land the small sound of water was a mirage of coolness to her thirst, though she dared not drink. Now the top of the hill seemed burningly inhospitable; she turned aside and followed the stream. After a quarter of a mile there was a new sound coming from the direction of two huge peepul trees straddling the bank, a liquid rustle. She reached the trees and gazed longingly at the small pool of cloudy green below her, at the green and white ribbon of water falling, slipping, splashing over the black rocks. The centre of the pool was a motionless surface, it moved again on the other side as it slid in silence between two boulders. It was tree-shaded; in the now dying wind a leaf like a golden wafer fell through sun and shadow, pricking the surface with its stem.

Johan sat beneath one of the trees, a fishing-line in his hand. He had taken off his shirt, and as she looked she waited, expecting desire. He turned his head quickly and scrambled to his feet, picking up his shirt.

"I had no idea you were here, Johan. Do you fish here often?" But his only answer was a painful smile, and she thought that the falling water had muffled her words. At the same moment she was pleased by this chance encounter; if she went at once it would surely remove any suspicions he may have had. "Don't let me disturb you" (what did it matter if he neither understood or heard, her

action would be enough), "I only followed the stream by accident. I'm going to climb the hill. I hope you catch a lot of fish." She smiled and turned away.

"*Hichir Buru*, memsahib?" He spoke quickly.

She turned back. "What's that?"

"A storm, then booommm . . ." his voice deepened and rolled, his raised right hand jerked down from side to side. "Bad place, bad cave." Then he stopped, feeling the skin move on the back of his neck. Better not speak of the cave. She was probably beyond its magic, and of course in a way so was he. But *he* had to live here, she was going away, quickly. All the sahibs were going soon, his mind added irrelevantly.

"I shan't be there long enough to get caught in a storm, even if there is one," she answered doubtfully. She did not want to go, for Johan's words and gesture had touched her with a nebulous fear. She was tired, from here the hill was steep. But she had come so far . . . if she had not met Johan she might have rested by the pool. "I shall see you tomorrow, Johan." She smiled meaninglessly and turned away. He stood and watched her. Then he sat down. He did not know what to do, but if he sat long enough something would come about and then he would make up his mind.

She crossed the track and made directly for the hill. It had an advantage of some nine hundred feet over the surrounding country and from this southern approach its side was concave, the last hundred feet very steep, jumbled rock bare of any vegetation. There was a black slit immediately below the crest.

She climbed slowly above the broken and chaotic plateau. The wind no longer blew, only hot eddies of air sometimes touched her face with a moment of sardonic

freshness. By the time she had reached two-thirds of the way she was trying to control her heavy breathing. Her aching muscles and parched mouth, the sick hand of heat on her neck, the finger-tips of sweat that strayed erratically down her face, all ran together like a fire over the surface of her mind. She reached the last burning steepness. The summit swam against the brassy sky, sank slowly down. She passed the narrow mouth of the cave without so much as glancing at it and reached the pinnacle of flat rock.

She waited until she could control her laboured breathing and the blood no longer thudded in her ears. She faced the south and saw ridge after paler ridge, each one more distance-haunted, more compelling, than the last. Unknown and therefore enchanted, asleep with peace, awake with beauty. And this remoteness drew emphasis from the west, where the land was less hilly, ochreous with cultivation. Even so it held for her a strange appeal, a longing to possess its unknown life, to submerge herself beneath the dark loveliness of the humanity that lived there and gave it another beauty than the lonely perfection of the south, amethyst with far-off jungle. Now, to the north, she could see the green patch of Bandhu, the white dot of the bungalow. Together they formed a note of discord almost beyond her perception, an infinitesimal flaw in a bell of solitude and beauty, a bell so huge that it seemed a new dimension, destroying time, turning all past and future into now. A bell which would (but for the flaw of Bandhu) strike a note beyond the register of experience or emotion. A note empty of any sound; a heat other than fire or ice, a knowledge that could not be known, only totally experienced.

The unstruck note was dying, suspiring with the rise and fall of her breast, its infinity draining into the green patch, the white dot. Only then was she aware that it had

almost struck, and was aware (beyond reason) that it was she, the clapper of the bell, who must strike this icy fire of sound, pierce and destroy the waxy membranes of her ear . . . she was turning her back on Bandhu, scrambling down the few feet to stand by the mouth of the cave, to block and to blot out and to seal this flaw with living rock, to sustain this sound which at any moment she herself would create and understand in its silence and perfection. . . .

There was nothing. Only the heat and the black rocks and the terrible emptiness of the huge sky. She was tired, so tired that the thought of the return journey was an apprehension. Suddenly she noticed that the wind from the west was dead, dammed back by a bank of low clouds. She wanted to call out, to break the heavy silence, to whisper to herself, but she was afraid of the heavier silence that might follow. She felt exposed, here above the countryside. She wanted to leave and she wanted to stay; was stupid with bodily discomfort. The clouds were swelling; the rocks threw out a heat fiercer than the sun. The entrance to the cave made the surface of her skin uncomfortable with fear, and yet she stepped through the obscuring curtain of sun which hid its interior.

It was more a leaning together of huge rocks than a cave. At the far end a fissure split the roof and a greyly white shaft of light showed a ledge of stone. Even from where she stood she recognised that one of the objects on the ledge was the skeleton of an animal, probably a dog. She walked towards it through the hot gloom, unthinking of the possibility of bats or scorpions or snakes. Pieces of stiff skin still fuzzed with hair were sticking to the ribs and hind legs, but there was no smell or sign of caked putrescence. In front of the skull was a dusty pool of tallow fat, but it was the phallus of stone between the hind

legs (once forced, now resting easily) which caught her eye. Its position and its shape told her at once what it was.

Fascinated, she watched her right hand reach out and touch the base of the phallus, heard the tiny sound of gold against stone. She pulled it away and held it in front of her. At the base its obsidian smoothness was too thick for her thumb and fingers to meet. It had been carefully carved and yet there was a hint of caricature, the modelling of the end was too pronounced, it was too long, the shallow curving backwardness too exaggerated. It was so rigid; it was increasing in weight; she squeezed her hand and the skin of the stone moved with a remembered darkness. The walls of the cave leaned closer, swayed imperceptibly as she reached out her hand again and returned it to the ledge. This time the sound she made mingled with another sound and the cave darkened. She turned slowly, afraid of what she would see.

A man stood in the mouth of the cave, featureless and black against the dazzling background of white light and mauve distance. For a moment she thought that he was naked; she stared, avidly, then she saw that his genitals were held in a narrow band of dark cloth which passed between his legs, was held by a loop of string around his narrow waist. She could feel the weight of the phallus in her hand again, knowing that she had put it down. She heard the words "Storm coming quickly, memsahib," and it was some seconds before she realised that the words were English, that the speaker was Johan. And at once she was viced with an aching lust, for now he was human (yet still blackly inhuman), he knew that she was about to leave Bāndhu, he had followed her through the hot afternoon, he was stripped to expose himself, was offering a last opportunity, he had come inside the cave instead of calling from the entrance; now he was moving away from

the mouth of the cave, stepping to one side, just as she would have done if she had been Johan, instinctively afraid that some hidden watcher from below, some innocent traveller, might see and interfere. And outside the cave lay everything that was unattainable, all the dissatisfactions and futilities, the sad beauty and the pointless yearnings, the unattainable landscape with herself in the centre, the unfillable flaw through which everything drained away, drained away. She moved closer. In a glance she understood the perfection of his body, felt it fill her with a rebellion so total that it seemed as if what she wanted was utterly and indisputably right, in another category altogether from right or wrong, an imperative command which she herself issued. "Johan." She came to him, expecting he would put out his hand to meet her. He stood quite still, but that meant nothing; only to touch would be necessary to release him. She could see hair like wire springing from the edge of the band of cloth. It was like other hair on other bodies and what was about to happen had happened before. And suddenly he was at once a symbol and an adding up of every orgasm she had ever had, of every haunting moment of exquisite and egotistical lust, the only moments when she was truly conscious of being far greater than herself, of fulfilling perfectly and completely the purpose of her existence. She cupped the bulge of cloth in her hand, and, as he started back, with her other hand held him against her, pressing against the rigid muscles above his buttocks. In a moment, this moment, she would feel lust swell against her cupped hand, swelling hugely to fill the cave. And there was nothing that she would not do or that could be impure. The clouds ate the sun; the dark shadows pouring from the cave mirrored what would happen, the darkness and silence and forgetting of mouths and the swollen

clinging inseparability of bodies; the smooth rupturing warmth of the buried phallus. And, as the thin saliva ran and mingled, the seminal and dragged-out cry of triumph and defeat. As her hand cupped his genitals and she tried to push her thumb beneath the band of cloth her open mouth fastened on his liver-coloured lips, her tongue forced its way through the white line of teeth, slid against the sour slime of his parched mouth.

His cry of disgust and terror, the violent jerking back of his head away from the contamination of her mouth was more painful than anything she could remember, filled her more completely than the first crash of thunder filled the darkened cave. She was rigid with an obliterating shame, and then the shame broke like rotten stone into shards of vicious anger and fear. He was pressed back against the wall and a flash of lightning gleamed in wide eyes, gleamed from her own saliva drying on his now disgusting mouth. She stepped forward and ripped down the front of her linen blouse, feeling the strap of her brassière break. She struck him as hard as she could across the face, rubbed her breast against him.

"How dare you! You filthy swine!" He had raped her, would rape her now. Then he would never speak. Her acceptance of something so loathsome would cleanse her. She travestied a smile. "I'm sorry, Johan. You can still have me. Come." She knew that he would not understand her words, she only spoke out loud to revolt herself with her own abject words and terrible humiliation. She took his limp cold hand and began to kneel on the floor near the entrance of the cave. Outside, the first heavy drops of rain were ponderously falling.

He must go or he would be totally destroyed, turned into an evil spirit baying for ever from this haunted cave. With the lethargy of a fear so great that he could feel death

enter his body he pulled away his hand. He began to descend the hill.

Her voice came to him. "You'll leave Bandhu! Never come back!" It was like a screech. Then the words were blotted out in a white flare of light, the sound of bursting rock and splitting sky and crash of rain; cold, cold as he ran blindly down the hill.

With supernatural strength, with every fibre of her being, she willed that he would be struck by lightning. For a short time she lay on the floor of the cave, stunned and appalled by the terrible sound. But that was as nothing compared with the corrosion of shame which seemed to have burst her mind and paralysed her. She longed for her own death: an annihilating flare to reach from the sky. But being human it was the hard rock and drenching showers of icy spray which brought her to her feet. Her terror of the cave and fear of being struck set her walking back towards the bungalow which held food and water and the sleep for which she craved.

And though sleep would come, there was still the long drudging walk home, the thunder-shaken hostile land, the fear of losing her way, the water-logged track and the tempest of wind and rain. There were still her own inescapable thoughts; a sick shame, a savage remorse, a longing to put back the clock. There were still the dirty little human contrivances burrowing in her mind, how to explain her torn blouse, how to get rid of Johan or stop him talking, what she would say if he had already told his story to Patras. She would deny everything, accuse him of being out of his mind, of attempted rape. Suddenly she remembered that he was a Catholic and might (she did not know) repeat all this at some confession to Depuyt. She wondered too how she would ever be able to look him once more in the face.

The passing of the storm did not relieve her mind, nor the sudden breaking through of the dying sun, living again in a thousand golden splinters of light. On her cheeks were a few golden splinters; raindrops.

(XIV)

The next morning, even before she was properly awake, she remembered everything. But her shame was not comparable to the shame she had experienced yesterday, for that had been an agony like fire. Now she was filled with a dull crushed hopelessness, yet resolved to use all the advantages of her position as a means of saving face until she could leave.

As she sat on the veranda and lit her after-breakfast cigarette she remembered that it was bazaar day in Anpura and there would be no work at the factory. She was sorry, for she would have preferred to face Johan and Patras as soon as possible. Then she saw Patras turn into the drive and walk towards her.

"*Jesu Marang*, memsahib." He bent his head over his folded hands as respectfully as on their first meeting while she answered him guardedly. Then he put down the shoes he was carrying and came on to the veranda. "Memsahib going to Anpura now?"

"No, Patras. Why?"

"Johan very sick, memsahib. Not speaking, only fever. I am hoping you speak to Deputy Gomke and bringing to Bandhu."

There was no escape, she decided. Within two, three hours Deputy would have heard everything. "Yes, Patras, if you really think it's necessary. I'll go now. Find the driver and tell him to bring the car."

But when she arrived at Deputy's bungalow only the

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 cook was there. Depuyt had left a note for her saying that he had returned on Sunday to celebrate Mass but was leaving again for a distant village where there was a suspected case of smallpox. He would come back on Tuesday afternoon and would expect the car to pick him up at six o'clock. He looked forward to her departure with regret.

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 She heard the car leave to fetch Depuyt. At once time began to flow again and she went to her bedroom to bath and change. All yesterday and all today had been a nightmare of heat and crawling hours, distorted with vague fears of some physical harm coming to her from Johan or Patras. And yet she was afraid too that Johan might die before Depuyt could be fetched and she would never know for certain why he had died, nor whether he had spoken. After she had finished dressing she sat on the veranda to wait. She felt incapable of bearing this burden any longer, and had decided to tell Depuyt everything. But she was not sure whether this decision was influenced by her belief that Johan would tell him anyway, and therefore she could only gain by putting forward her own account.

She told herself that this was quite just, for she was not entirely to blame. It had all started with Michael's chance remark that Johan bore some resemblance to Robert and from then on, through no fault of her own, had come the Sadhu, the storm, and out of the storm her obsession. Even then everything would have been all right had it not been for the mischance of that vile cave, which, with his sudden and still unexplained appearance, had broken her self-control. *That* was the line to take . . . but why start at Michael? There were other extenuating circumstances

much further back than that. If only Robert . . . and suddenly all her excuses collapsed, ran together in an inextricable confusion as she watched the solidity of herself, past, present and future, every gesture and every breath, reduce itself to the meaningless chaos of the words 'if only'. She touched the scar on her temple; if only . . . nothing. No Robert, and, at the end, no Johan. She existed by virtue of the words 'if only': if they were nothing then she was nothing too, a meaningless chaos.

But it was true; by herself she *was* nothing, only allowed to touch weakly the guide reins of an unchoosable past. Even her present existence only continued by a form of favour. At any moment of any day some event could take place, catastrophically big or farcically small, and she would cease to exist.

But she was here, alive, sitting on the veranda. Something had brought her to this point, had sustained her and kept her in being. Even as she had lain on the floor of the cave with all her intimations broken and soiled, ruined by her own act, and she herself exposed to herself as something past contempt, even at the moment when she most wished to die, she had been sustained. Nor was her life a meaningless chaos. Though it might appear so to the whole world, to her it was not. Each event, however fortuitous, seemed to fit naturally into everything that had taken place before, seemed even to be capable of altering the past in some strange way so that cataclysms, for good or bad, lost their impact even as they struck.

Slowly she was aware of an inexplicable and warm gratitude. The crushing misery of the last two days lifted. She was still full of a revolted sickness against the whole of herself—and suddenly this became a physical fact, her chest heaved and she felt as though she was about to choke while the thought flashed: 'God, I'm going to be sick,'

and then she was crying. She got up quickly and ran to her bedroom. Gopal might come in or hear, so she locked herself in the bathroom and sat on the commode. She had no handkerchief, but it was better to use a face towel and muffle the small sounds she could not hide. And the tears streamed from her eyes in a way she could never remember before, and yet the taste of grief was like the taste of honey.

When she had finished she bathed her face mechanically and sat on the edge of the bed.

She was calm and happy and (for a reason that she did not analyse) knew that tonight she would say nothing to Depuyt. She would ask him to reassure Johan that his position here was secure, but that was only a triviality. What passed between Johan and Depuyt was no concern of hers and no longer mattered.

The cave no longer mattered either; washed away. Nothing mattered, only this feeling of peace as at the end of a long journey. For the first time in her life she was tasting a few of the many truths about herself, their flavour undisguised. All her individuality, as she saw it, was a sham, had appeared to her larger than life because she was more beautiful than most, had possessed wealth and above all had so loved and been loved by Robert; and she knew too that it was the same for everyone else, everyone had to live the confusion of their uniqueness. But now she understood that as a woman she was probably more stupid than most, had lived her life on an extroverted and sensory level, running blindly from one palliative to another, and she understood as well that these palliatives were in themselves good; beautiful and designed for happiness. But their use or disuse was governed by the laws of the same force which had held her in being, and her offence had been to abrogate that power. And she

sensed (because already this effort to think was confusing her) that whether she gazed on the abstract and holy beauty of the world, or caressed in darkness the material beauty of its flesh, as long as she did this from the seeming eminence of herself she was doomed to a dead and bitter futility.

Yet she was fiercely glad that she was Sarah Middleton, and did not want that any facet of her life and character had been different. And at this moment she was glad that she was barren, glad of the death of Robert; without that she would never have achieved this empirical knowledge, her longing for this knowledge would have been siphoned off, betrayed by her own weakness, her own ignorance.

And as she stood up to go to her mirror she understood that although everything was changed for her, yet everything remained the same. There still existed criminal forms of beauty to which the alternative of surrender was to die a death of herself. And that all her life should be such a dying, a stripping away of skins that hid herself, more skins than the skin of an onion, and that in this task her ignorance was such that she must be humble and accept the help of others. Even so the process might be too painful and she too weak; she might give up the task. But she could not believe that that was possible, and somehow she knew that the success of the attempt began and ended in the attempt itself.

She heard, in the far distance, the car returning from Anpura.

